

The Foreign Born In The Armed Services

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As the United States plans to send an additional 20,000 troops to Iraq, President George W. Bush and other government officials continue to laud the contributions of the foreign born in the US military.

Lawful permanent residents and certain nationals of three countries in free association with the United States — the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau — are eligible for military service. In addition, Congress has deemed other foreign-born individuals eligible to serve if the secretary of a specific military branch determines that "such enlistment is vital to the national interest."

The current presence of the foreign born in the military is consistent with previous periods of large-scale immigration. According to Emilio T. González, director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the foreign born composed half of all military recruits by the 1840s and constituted 20 percent of the 1.5 million service men in the Union Army during the Civil War.

This Spotlight focuses on the statistics and recent policy changes regarding the foreign born in the US armed services (army, navy, US Marines, air force). The data from the Department of Defense are as of May 2006, and the data from USCIS are from December 2006, unless otherwise noted.

Note: the Migration Information Source follows the US Census Bureau's definition of foreign born, who are defined as people who were not US citizens at birth. Thus, the foreign born in this Spotlight include members of the US military who are either naturalized citizens or noncitizens.

Click on the bullet points below for more information:

Statistics on the Foreign Born

- There are approximately 68,711 foreign born serving in the US armed forces.
- The foreign born in the armed forces represent approximately 5 percent of the total on active duty.
- Of all military branches, the navy has the highest number of foreign-born personnel.
- Approximately 8 percent of the men and women serving in the navy are foreign born.
- Over 11,000 foreign-born women are serving in the armed forces.
- Over 10 percent of those serving in the armed forces are of Hispanic origin.
- The top two countries of origin for foreign-born military personnel are the Philippines and Mexico.

- Latin America and the Caribbean account for the largest percentage of the foreign born, followed closely by Asia.
- As of December 2006, the armed services had 469 members born in the Middle East and 674 born in south-central Asia.
- Approximately half of the foreign born serving in the armed forces are naturalized citizens.

Citizenship and the Armed Forces

- A July 2002 executive order made noncitizen members of the armed forces eligible for expedited US citizenship.
- More than 13,000 foreign-born members of the armed forces have applied for US citizenship since the July 2002 executive order.
- Since September 11, 2001, 84 military personnel killed in the line of duty have received posthumous citizenship.
- USCIS has granted citizenship to approximately 2,500 foreign-born service members since 2004.

Statistics on the Foreign Born

There are approximately 68,711 foreign born serving in the US armed forces.

As of May 2006, there were 68,711 foreign-born individuals on active duty in the US military. This number includes both naturalized citizens and noncitizens.

The foreign born in the armed forces represent approximately 5 percent of the total on active duty.

The foreign born represented 5.0 percent of the 1.36 million active duty personnel in the armed forces as of May 2006.

Of all military branches, the navy has the highest number of foreign-born personnel.

There were 28,796 foreign-born individuals in the navy as of May 2006, representing 41.9 percent of the total foreign-born population serving on active duty. There were also 18,208 foreign-born individuals (26.5 percent) serving in the army; 13,620 foreign-born individuals (19.8 percent) in the air force; and 8,087 (11.8 percent) in the US Marines.

Approximately 8 percent of the men and women serving in the navy are foreign born.

Foreign-born individuals constituted 8.2 percent of the total 349,301 navy personnel as of May 2006. The foreign born also comprised 3.7 percent of the 487,898 men and women serving in the army; 3.9 percent of the 347,758 individuals in the air force; and 4.5 percent of the 178,190 personnel serving in the US Marines.

Over 11,000 foreign-born women are serving in the armed forces.

As of May 2006, 11,651 foreign-born women were on active duty in the US armed forces, representing 17 percent of all foreign born serving in the military.

Over 10 percent of those serving in the armed forces are of Hispanic origin.

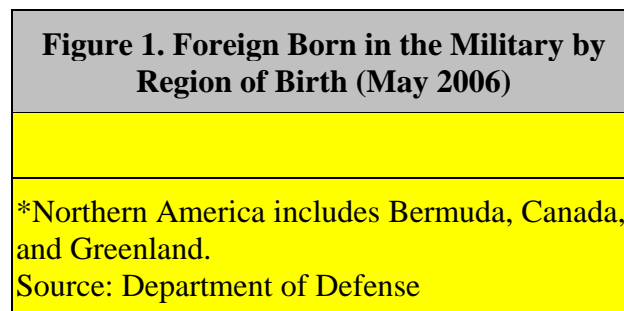
Persons of Hispanic origin accounted for 10.2 percent (138,556) of the total 1,363,147 men and women serving in the armed forces as of May 2006. Hispanics made up 13.5 percent (24,075) of the 178,190 persons serving in the US Marines; 12.5 percent (13,703) of the 349,301 men and women in the navy; 10.6 percent (51,673) of the 487,898 individuals in the army; and 5.5 percent (19,105) of the 347,758 air force personnel.

The top two countries of origin for foreign-born military personnel are the Philippines and Mexico.

The Philippines, with 24.2 percent (16,628), accounted for the largest percentage of the foreign born in the armed forces as of May 2006. In addition, 9.4 percent (6,427) of the foreign born were born in Mexico; 5.7 percent (3,895) in Jamaica; 2.9 percent (2,020) in Korea; and 2.8 percent (1,942) in the Dominican Republic.

Latin America and the Caribbean accounted for the largest percentage of the foreign born, followed closely by Asia.

Foreign-born military personnel from Latin America and the Caribbean constituted 40 percent (27,487) of all foreign born in the armed forces, while 39.9 percent (27,406) were from Asia (see Figure 1).



As of December 2006, the armed services had 469 members born in the Middle East and 674 born in south-central Asia.

Of all foreign-born active duty personnel, 469 were born in the Middle East, with 118 from Iran (35 noncitizens); 19 from Iraq (eight noncitizens); 37 from Israel (nine noncitizens); 30 from Jordan (10 noncitizens); 28 from Kuwait (13 noncitizens); 62 from Lebanon (12 noncitizens); 28 from Saudi Arabia (15 noncitizens); and 21 from Syria (six noncitizens).

From south-central Asia, there were 59 foreign born from Afghanistan (26 noncitizens); 77 from Bangladesh (48 noncitizens); one naturalized citizen born in Bhutan; 392 from India (156 noncitizens); 16 from Nepal (nine noncitizens); and 129 from Pakistan (67 noncitizens).

Approximately half of the foreign born serving in the armed forces are naturalized citizens.

As of May 2006, 51.3 percent (35,262) of the 68,711 foreign-born military personnel were naturalized citizens, and 48.6 percent (33,449) were noncitizens. The share of foreign-born naturalized citizens on active duty has decreased since December 2004, when naturalized citizens made up 57 percent of the foreign born in the armed services.

Citizenship and the Armed Forces

A July 2002 executive order made noncitizen members of the armed forces eligible for expedited US citizenship.

Section 329 of the Immigration and Nationality Act authorizes the president to issue executive orders specifying periods of conflict during which foreign-born members of the US military are eligible for immediate US citizenship. In a July 2002 executive order, President Bush specified that such a period of hostilities began after September 11, 2001, and that foreign-born, noncitizen military personnel serving on or after that date were thus eligible for expedited citizenship. During times of peace, noncitizen armed forces members may obtain citizenship after a one-year waiting period.

According to the White House, other executive orders specifying periods of conflict have allowed noncitizens to immediately become US citizens. During World War I and World War II, for example, 143,000 noncitizen military personnel were immediately naturalized; 31,000 foreign-born armed services members became citizens during the Korean War.

More than 13,000 foreign-born members of the armed forces have applied for US citizenship since the July 2002 executive order.

According to USCIS data from March 2006, more than 13,000 foreign-born military personnel have applied for expedited citizenship since President Bush's July 2002 executive order. This figure represents approximately half of the 26,000 armed services members (according to August 2006 USCIS figures) who have become citizens since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Since September 11, 2001, 84 military personnel killed in the line of duty have received posthumous citizenship.

According to December 2006 figures from USCIS, 84 armed services members killed in action have been awarded posthumous citizenship. Public Law 101-249 grants US citizenship, upon request of a relative, to a noncitizen killed in active duty during specific periods of military conflict.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) of 2004 extended immigration benefits to the immediate family members (parents, spouse, and children) of service members who receive posthumous citizenship. The law's provisions are retroactive to September 11, 2001.

Recent policy changes have allowed USCIS to hold naturalization ceremonies at US military bases around the world.

Revisions in the US citizenship law in 2004 have allowed USCIS to conduct naturalization interviews and ceremonies for foreign-born service members stationed at military bases abroad. According to USCIS data from December 2006, more than 2,500 foreign-born service members have since become citizens while on active duty in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

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