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From the Revolutionary War to the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, immigrants have made significant contributions to the United States by serving in our military forces. Today, immigrants voluntarily serve in all branches of the U.S. military and are a vital resource in the Global War on Terrorism. To recognize their unique contribution, immigrants serving honorably in the military who are not yet U.S. citizens are granted significant advantages in the naturalization process.

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Over the past five years, Congress has amended military-related enlistment and naturalization rules, allowing for expanded benefits for immigrants and their families and encouraging recruitment of immigrants into the U.S. armed forces. Without the contributions of immigrants, the military could not meet its recruiting goals and could not fill the need for foreign-language translators, interpreters, and cultural experts.

As of December 2004, there were 69,299 foreign-born individuals serving in the armed forces, representing 4.9 percent of the 1.4 million military personnel on active duty. Roughly 57 percent of foreign-born service members were naturalized citizens, while the remaining 43 percent were not U.S. citizens.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2005, 4,614 members of the military were naturalized. Naturalizations of immigrants in the military are at their highest during times of war.

The September 11th attacks precipitated immediate changes in policies on immigrants in the military. Once the nation was at war, immigrants in the armed forces were eligible for naturalization under the special wartime military naturalization statute. As of October 2006, more than 25,000 immigrants had taken advantage of this provision to become U.S. citizens, and another 40,000 were thought to be eligible to apply.

Recognizing that immigrants could provide special assistance to the armed forces as translators, Congress in 2006 passed a law providing for up to 50 immigrant visas per year for translators serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Given the great need for Arabic, Pashto, Dari, and other translators, it is not clear why Congress chose this low number.

Congress has failed to act on the few legislative proposals that would significantly increase the participation of immigrants in the military.

*(Margaret Stock is an attorney in Anchorage, Alaska; a Lieutenant Colonel in the Military Police Corps, U.S. Army Reserve; and an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York. The opinions expressed in this report are the author's and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or any other government agency.)*

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