

Trump revives push to denaturalize US citizens



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It used to be that immigrants who earned U.S. citizenship could only see it taken away if they hid their Nazi past, had ties to terrorists, or lied on their application – fewer than a dozen people per year.

That changed during President Donald Trump's first administration when he led a campaign to denaturalize thousands of immigrant U.S. citizens – though it never met its goals. Last week, Trump rebooted the effort, ordering "adequate resources" be spent to denaturalize some U.S. citizens as part of his broader plan to restrict immigration.

Tucked among the priorities listed in his Day 1 executive orders was a one-line reference to enforcing a section of immigration law under which the government can revoke an immigrant's U.S. citizenship if it was "unlawfully procured."

The directive is listed in the order called "Protecting the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and Public Safety Threats." It's an indication that denaturalization will be part of his crackdown, said Amanda Frost, a University of Virginia law professor and immigration attorney.

"We saw what happened last time," Frost said. "A lot of resources were put into denaturalization."

Trump's new directive got little attention amid the flurry of eye-catching orders to launch the president's promised "mass deportation." In his first week, the president declared a national border emergency; deployed 1,500 troops to the border, including a combat force; and deputized thousands more federal law enforcement officers to arrest immigrants, among other moves.

But this quiet, back-office directive has immigrant advocates worried because of the wide net his administration cast the last time.

"Since the executive orders have been signed, there is a lot of fear generally," said Gintare Grigaitė, a New Jersey-based immigration attorney who successfully fought a denaturalization case during the first Trump administration. She has been fielding calls from nervous clients, even those who have already become citizens.

"People are asking all kinds of hypotheticals," she said. "Is there a legal path for someone to go after them, to take away their naturalization? If everything was truthful they shouldn't be fearful. If they have obtained citizenship in the rightful way, then they shouldn't be in fear of being denaturalized."

'Zero tolerance' campaign

During Trump's first administration, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions ordered the investigation of 700,000 naturalized citizens, with a goal of bringing some 1,600 cases to the courts. The denaturalization effort was part of the administration's "zero tolerance" campaign, best known for the prosecution of border crossers and family separation.

A spokesperson for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, or USCIS, which reviews citizenship applications, referred USA TODAY to the White House, which didn't respond to an emailed request for information.

Trump's initial push to investigate naturalized citizens was an expansion of an initiative that began under President Barack Obama.

At the time, the federal government had switched from paper to using digital fingerprints, and Homeland Security officials uncovered hundreds of cases in which naturalized citizens had been previously deported or lied about criminal records that USCIS couldn't see. The

Obama administration began a review, aiming to denaturalize any citizen with ties to foreign terrorist organizations.

Obama's denaturalization review focused on people with potential connections to terror groups, or criminal history, or who posed national security risks

"They ignored the garden variety discrepancies in the person's immigration history," said Cassandra Burke Robertson, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University who has researched denaturalization campaigns. "The Trump administration changed that. They put more resources into the program. The directive was to pursue denaturalization of anybody who had potential grounds for such."

That included "discrepancies in the file – even typographical errors or an innocent mistake in the immigration process," she said.

Research suggests the first Trump administration never met its goal of referring 1,600 cases for civil or criminal prosecution, two avenues used to revoke citizenship.

Irina Manta, a law professor at Hofstra University, began building a database of denaturalization cases. She found 168 cases in the courts during the Trump administration and 64 under the Biden administration, suggesting that the effort may have slowed but didn't end over the past four years.

"You would think naturalization would be final, no matter what people did or didn't do," Manta said. "The government shouldn't be able to come back five years later and question it."

Trump's approach – called for by the conservative Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 – has been far broader. Mark Krikorian, executive director of the right-leaning Center for Immigration Studies said casting a wider net, in search of fraud or misrepresentations, makes sense.

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"It's making rules mean what they say," Krikorian said. "In a sense, it has to be broad because the whole immigration system has been far too lackadaisical."

'Targeted, very political' Cold War effort

In the red-baiting 1950s, the U.S. government used its considerable power to strip citizenship from immigrants it viewed as political enemies – labor leaders, journalists, or critics of the government accused of being Communists, said Frost, the University of Virginia law professor.

"It was a very targeted, very political Cold War effort," she said.

Through the two world wars and into the 1950s, some 22,000 immigrants saw their U.S. citizenship revoked.

The Supreme Court put an end to politically driven denaturalization campaigns in 1967, ruling that the government could only revoke an immigrant's citizenship in the case of fraud or "willful misrepresentation."

In the quarter century before Trump first took office, from 1990 to 2017, the U.S. government targeted an average of 11 naturalized citizens per year, according to Frost's research.

Most of those had committed war crimes or other atrocities, then lied about their past to obtain citizenship.

"In the first Trump administration, we saw quite a large increase in the number of denaturalization proceedings," Burke Robertson said. "It's clear his (new) administration seems to be starting where they left off."