

IMMIGRATION: AN OPINION



by E. James Burton

The following opinion is that of the author—not necessarily the BERC, Jones College, or MTSU.

This is perhaps the most difficult of these pieces I've had to write. Opinions on immigration range widely among intelligent, thoughtful people. If the answers were clear, we wouldn't still be having such heated debates. What can I add but another opinion?

My first inclination is to get to the basics as quickly as possible, so I reach for a dictionary to be sure I have the right definitions: "*immigrant*, *n.* a person who immigrates; *immigrate*, *v.i.*, to come into another country for permanent residence." Immigrants enter another country for permanent residence—not short periods for sightseeing, vacation, conferences, meetings, or work—but to make it their permanent residence.

I have had the pleasure of traveling more than the average U.S. citizen—within the U.S. and to several foreign countries—always with the intent, means (appropriate documents, tickets, money, and itinerary), and reasonably certain time to return home. I always considered those preparations reasonable. Perhaps that is just my nature. I certainly have known of folks willing to travel without making such preparations even if they intended at some point to return home. But generally I think most travelers are more like me than like those latter, more carefree types.

I have never been an immigrant but have moved from state to state within the U.S. I have lived in Kentucky, Illinois, Florida, and Tennessee. Each time I stayed more than three years and had a job to go to and a fixed address where I would live when I arrived. I had proper documents in the community I left, and I got proper documentation (driver's license, voter's registration), became a part of my new community (attending churches and schools, joining civic organizations, voting), and became economically productive (paying taxes). It was always legal for me as a U.S. citizen to set up residence in another state. While not required to go to church, participate in civic affairs, or register to vote, I was required by law to get a proper driver's license, usually within 30 days, and to pay taxes. So even for a citizen, moving from one state to another involves certain legal expectations.

When I have traveled to foreign countries, I entered through established, monitored entry

portals, where I showed proper identification, usually a passport—in some cases a visa, advance permission to enter for a specified purpose and time. I was legal but only as a visitor, not there to set up permanent residence.

Based on my experience, it seems to me that noncitizens who enter this country (or any country) fall into three broad categories: visitors, immigrants, and illegal entrants.

Visitors legally enter through specified portals, where people check required documents and make a considered decision about the person's entry based on available information. The visit is for a prescribed time and purpose authorized by that country. No permanent status is intended. Upon fulfillment of the time or purpose, the visitor leaves through a prescribed portal and documentation is finalized.

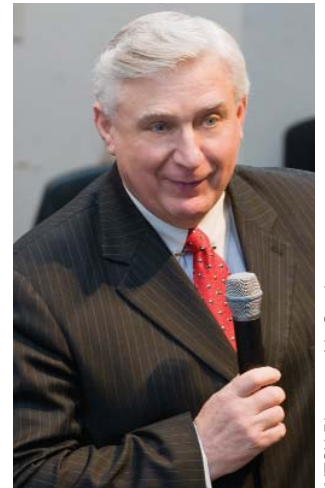
I have been detained at a border when my papers were not all in order because I had not paid a certain fee I did not know was necessary. It was an uncomfortable feeling. Though I knew I had done nothing wrong, sitting alone in a room waiting, my imagination ran wild. But the question was sorted out fairly quickly and I was allowed to proceed.

Immigrants usually apply for such status in advance of arriving in the intended country. In some limited, emergency cases that may be waived. Generally, immigrants are provided information explaining exactly what is expected regarding documents, etc., and either have sufficient means or a sponsor to help find a place to live. To gain full status, they normally agree to sever their relationship with their country of origin and pledge allegiance to their new country. There may be some instances of dual citizenship.

I can't really quite imagine what being an immigrant feels like. To pull oneself away from family, friends, culture, language, and routine to enter a new world "forever" takes a special or sometimes desperate person. I have great respect for immigrants. Most U.S. citizens don't have far to look in their family tree to find examples.

Finally, the third category is illegal entrants: those people who have entered the country without proper documentation and authorization. In my opinion, they cannot have a reasonable expectation of permanent residence and can be removed at any time.

If we use these three categories and treat people who enter the country accordingly, we can avoid a lot of unnecessary confusion. ■



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