A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NEWS COVERAGE AND POLICY DISCOURSE ON THE MILITARY ACCESSIONS VITAL TO NATIONAL INTEREST (MAVNI) PROGRAM

By Anna Vygoder

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Master of Justice Studies in

The Department of Sociology

The Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Rhode Island College

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Approved:

_____	_____
Advisor and Committee Chair—Dr. Alessandra Bazo Vienrich	Date
_____	_____
Committee Member—Dr. Desirée Ciambrone	Date
_____	_____
Committee Member—Dr. Marcia Esparza	Date
_____	_____
Department Chair—Dr. Desirée Ciambrone	Date
_____	_____
Dean of School—Quenby Hughes	Date

Abstract

The goal of this research is to analyze the discourse around the Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) Program. This initiative aims to address critical shortages within the armed services regarding qualified personnel possessing either a medical or a strategic language background. Since the program's inception, over 10,400 individuals have sworn to defend the United States Constitution against all threats, foreign and domestic (Fact Sheet: MAVNI). However, the program is temporarily suspended and no longer accepting applicants due to vetting complications and inadequate screening protocols that are claimed to have raised serious security concerns (Philipps, 2018). This project will explore the role of media representations of MAVNI in shaping the public's knowledge of the program, and of the service members in it. I posit that MAVNI's existence, and its subsequent suspension, symbolizes the ongoing debate in the U.S. over immigration, security, and national identity. It highlights tensions between openness to immigrants and concerns over security risks, and it reflects broader societal discussions about who belongs and what it means to be an American. Through content analysis of news stories, congressional documents, and reports, this research will shed light on how the MAVNI program framed its role in the context of military recruitment goals and justified making the armed forces available to immigrants.

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Introduction

The process of gaining citizenship has been a point of contention since the early days of the United States, reflecting shifts as the country experienced various waves of global immigration. Historically, various immigrant groups have been deemed undesirable and subjected to persistent racism, facing institutional barriers based on claims that they would harm the American workforce, negatively impact economic growth, burden taxpayers, and deplete public resources. Restrictions on unauthorized entry began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with formal statutory and administrative measures taking shape after World War I. Mae Ngai, author of *Impossible Subjects* (2014), highlights the Chinese Exclusion Act as the first significant federal legislation aimed at restricting Chinese labor immigration. This decade-long ban marked the beginning of discriminatory laws against various immigrant groups and led to the Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act), which introduced a national quota system to limit immigrant admissions, particularly targeting individuals from Southern and Eastern Europe due to fears and speculation about threats to American democracy (Ngai, 2014). During World War II, Japanese Americans were forcibly interned by the U.S. government, reflecting how political conflict intertwines with perceptions of foreignness and allegiance (Ngai, 2014). Despite an executive apology and the abolition of national-origin quotas by Congress in 1965, many Americans continue to support quantitative restrictions and remain resistant to alternative viewpoints (Ngai, 2014).

Nevertheless, when it comes to military recruitment some of the tactics used to curtail immigration seem to not apply. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, “Immigrant Service Members are Part of the Fabric of America;” and have put their lives on the line in every

conflict since the inception of the nation (ACLU News & Commentary). In her book, *Green Card Soldier*, Sofya Aptekar (2023) underscores that historically, immigrants have in fact served as military labor in the United States. Whether enlisting voluntarily or being drafted, immigrants played a pivotal role in every military campaign, both within and beyond the nation's borders (Aptekar, 2023). She emphasizes that in "... 2018, there were 1.3 million people on active duty and over 18 million veterans. Around 3 percent of the veterans, or 530,000, are immigrants" (Aptekar, 2023). This research will probe further into the reasons for non-citizens' service to their host country. It will also explore how white supremacy manifests in the lives of immigrants and tie the current meaning of race in military recruitment to past policies that set whiteness as a precondition for naturalization.

This study explores the military's image as an institution of integration for foreign-born service members. The literature suggests that citizenship through military enlistment often comes at a cost for young immigrants of color (Buenavista 2012), and critiques of Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) have suggested that the program made immigrants' options for legalization narrow and conditional through enlistment. This work zeroes in on naturalization that is dependent on putting immigrant lives on the line. As such, this study investigates the military's practice of naturalization through enlistment vis-a-vis MAVNI as an example of predatory recruitment of immigrants with precarious legal statuses under the guise of immigrant incorporation. To explore how MAVNI can ultimately lead to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals this study calls attention to the complex intersection of immigration policies and militarism, bringing the following questions to the forefront:

1. What policy missteps and structural flaws led to the failure of the MAVNI program, and how did these failures undermine the historical precedent of using military service as a pathway to naturalization in the United States?

2. What does the selective recruitment of certain immigrant groups (e.g., those deemed to speak critical languages) over others (e.g., Spanish speakers), reveal about the militarization of immigration policy in the United States?

3. In what ways did the MAVNI program impact immigrant trust in the military and government institutions?

To answer these questions I analyze primary sources, notably the United States Code, along with secondary media sources, as they pertain to the recruitment of non-citizens (Lorenzen, 2011). Examining historical precedents of service-member naturalization is crucial, as these examples provide valuable context for understanding current policies and practices. They highlight the long-standing relationship between military service and citizenship, demonstrating how the United States has historically relied on and leveraged the contributions of non-citizen soldiers. Throughout various conflicts and periods of national need, the U.S. has tapped into the skills and dedication of non-citizen recruits (Damon, 2022; Lorenzen, 2011). By studying these precedents, we can better grasp the evolving nature of citizenship in the context of military service and its implications for future policy decisions.

The Origins of the Relationship Between National Service and Naturalization

There are four primary methods by which a person can acquire citizenship; through birth, acquisition, derivation, and naturalization. The concept of *jus meritum*, or citizenship earned through military service, highlights the idea that serving one's country can be a pathway to naturalization. Wong and Bonaguro (2020) investigate whether public opinion varies depending on immigrants initially entering the country legally or without documentation, and whether the type of military service impacts support for their naturalization. Contrary to the prevailing normative argument, Wong and Bonaguro (2020) contend that naturalization should be considered a rightful and just reward for military service, particularly for those who display the courage to volunteer and fight for the United States—a duty many American citizens have opted not to undertake. In fact, one could argue that any form of self-sacrifice in service to the nation, regardless of its specific role or nature, merits recognition, respect, and commendation (Wong & Bonaguro, 2020). Citizenship, in this context, serves as a symbolic acknowledgment of their profound contribution to the country's defense and values. Nevertheless, some have argued that those same contributions are not reciprocated when it comes to the rights and dignity assigned to immigrant soldiers. Cacho (2012) argues that ineligibility to personhood is present for racialized immigrants even if they serve in the military. Within this context, individuals that occupy uncertain legal statuses are rendered rightless and become targets of differential inclusion rooted upon the presumptions of their collective ethnic inferiority and US-born superiority (Cacho, 2012). On that account, even though military service appears to be a plausible route to naturalization, it hinges on the intersection of racialization that has been designed and redesigned by American institutions.

The History and Legacy of Military Service Among Immigrants

Immigrant military service in the U.S. dates back to the Revolutionary War, when citizenship was offered as an incentive to encourage enlistment in state militias and the Continental Army (Weisberger, 1994; Wong & Bonaguro, 2020). Non-citizens from diverse backgrounds fought alongside American minutemen—colonial militia members ready to engage in combat at a moment's notice. Immigrant soldiers, serving alongside them, contributed essential skills and experiences to the fight for independence (Fogleman, 1998). Many were motivated by the very same ideals of liberty and democracy, underscoring a shared dedication to self-government, equality, and freedom (Weisberger, 1994). By the 1840s, a surge of immigrants settled in the North, giving it a population advantage over the South. During the Civil War, the Union capitalized on this by passing the Alien Soldiers Naturalization Act of 1862, which offered expedited citizenship to immigrants who fought for the Union. This act not only bolstered the Union's military ranks but also marked a pivotal moment in strengthening the link between immigration and national service (Goring, 2000; Lorenzen, 2011).

In the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, legislation mirrored the country's prevailing anti-immigrant sentiment. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was a landmark piece of legislation that restricted immigration into the United States (Lee, 2002). As the first major federal effort, it prohibited the entry of Chinese laborers for a period of ten years and denied this ethnic working group the opportunity to obtain U.S. citizenship (Calavita, 2000; Lee, 2002). This act set a precedent for proscriptive immigration policies, which were echoed in military enlistment criteria. Army enlistees were not only obligated to demonstrate the ability to read, write, and speak English, but also declare their intentions to naturalize (Cunha et al., 2014).

However, during World War I, at the height of the exclusion era, the United States Congress passed the Alien Naturalization Act of 1918, amending the nation's naturalization laws to allow foreign-born soldiers serving in the military to obtain immediate citizenship (Lorenzen, 2011). The act specifically waived several standard naturalization requirements, such as residency and literacy tests, enabling these soldiers to become U.S. citizens immediately or shortly after their honorable service (Banks, 2019). This legislative change marked a significant departure from the typical naturalization process, driven by the urgent need for manpower during a critical time for the country. The expedited citizenship was a reflection of the nation's reliance on these soldiers to support the war effort (Banks, 2019; Lorenzen, 2011). Historically, it has been evident that during times of national need, eligibility requirements are often relaxed or lowered, allowing a greater number of foreign-born individuals to enlist in the military (Cunha et al., 2014).

The Nationality Act of 1940 played a crucial role in shaping the legal framework governing the process for immigrants to gain United States citizenship through naturalization that remains in effect today. The Act not only spelled out the eligibility criteria, which included residency requirements, spoken and written proficiency in the English language, comprehension of U.S. history and government, but laid out necessary conditions for dual nationality and addressed circumstances under which a person could lose citizenship (Hyde, 1941). Nonetheless, in 1942, in response to the growing demand for military personnel during World War II, Congress passed an amendment that expedited the naturalization process for non-citizens serving in the armed forces (Lorenzen, 2011). This legislation allowed foreign-born individuals who demonstrated their allegiance to the United States by becoming naturalized citizens to swiftly join the ranks of those fighting in the war (Damon, 2022). Wong and Bonaguro (2020) underscore that, in exceptionally rare instances, the primary driver for recruiting non-citizens

into military service was necessity. When volunteer numbers were insufficient, the nation's defenses were compromised, leaving the safety of the community at risk (Wong & Bonaguro, 2020). In these situations, the need to bolster military ranks overrode traditional citizenship requirements, emphasizing the critical role that non-citizens played in ensuring national security during times of shortage. By codifying laws that accelerated citizenship for immigrants willing to defend the nation, Congress not only expanded the available manpower but also highlighted its readiness to tap into the diverse population pool in times of national crisis (Lorenzen, 2011). This approach sheds light on the critical role immigrants played in strengthening the military during another key moment in history. However, it is essential to juxtapose these military recruitment efforts with the simultaneous relocation and internment of approximately 120,000 Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans on U.S. soil during World War II (Kessler, 1988). While European immigrants who joined the armed forces were perceived as racially assimilable and commended for their allegiance, Japanese immigrants and their American-born descendants were deemed a national security liability explicitly on the basis of ancestry and race (Nagata & Takeshita, 1998). The stark contrast of Executive Order 9066 reflects the racialized logic underpinning American immigration and military policies at the time (Kessler, 1988; Nagata & Takeshita, 1998).

Moreover, the Nationality Act of 1940 established administrative procedures for handling matters related to citizenship through the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which is now part of the Department of Homeland Security and under the assumed responsibility of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Afterward, the Nationality Act (INA) of 1952 consolidated all existing laws related to immigration and naturalization, while simultaneously maintaining and expanding upon previous restrictions. In successive years, the

Act was continuously revised to expand immigration opportunities and accommodate previously excluded or restricted groups (Bennett, 1966). It profoundly reshaped immigration policy and the cultural landscape of the United States by updating quotas based on national origin and unifying earlier nationality laws. The Act propelled the nation towards a more inclusive approach through family reunification, the granting of citizenship for residents of territories, and prioritizing the admission of relatives (Marinari, 2016). The significant mid-20th century legislation paved the way for future provisions regarding non-citizen members of the armed forces gaining citizenship if they served honorably (Knight, 1940).

Sections 328 and 329 of the INA pertain to the naturalization process for certain members of the U.S. Armed Forces in peacetime or during periods of hostilities ((*Essentials of Naturalization for Military Service Members and Veterans*, 2018). Specifically, INA Section 328 stipulates that individuals who have served honorably in the U.S. Armed Forces for a cumulative total of at least one year are eligible for naturalization. On the other hand, INA Section 329 provides that non-citizens who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces during a period of hostilities are also eligible for naturalization, with the added benefit of waiving the requirement to be physically present in the United States (*INA 328 and 329) | USCIS*, 2023). This provision recognizes the unique circumstances and sacrifices made by service members during times of conflict, allowing them to apply for citizenship without the usual residency requirements.

An individual who served honorably in the United States armed forces may be granted posthumous citizenship if they die as the result of injury incurred by their service in combat or during periods of hostility (Damon, 2022). The service member is recognized as a U.S. citizen as of their date of death; however, the next of kin must submit *Form N-644, Application for Posthumous Citizenship*, within two years of the applicant's passing (Lee & Wasem, 2009).

Additionally, under special provisions of the INA, immediate relatives of the deceased service member may be eligible for certain immigration benefits (Damon, 2022). Although posthumous citizenship is a symbolic honor granted to noncitizens who sacrificed their lives defending the United States, the reality is that immigrants serving in the Armed Forces fulfill duties traditionally expected of citizens. Hector Amaya contends that posthumous citizenship lacks the individual's consent (2007). Additionally, imposing citizenship on someone posthumously reflects imperialistic tendencies, which have already adversely impacted many immigrants' lives, and therefore, should be rejected (Amaya, 2007). However, the Oath of Enlistment, which immigrants must take to join the Army, can be seen as a form of consent indicating their desire to become citizens. By swearing this oath, immigrants express their willingness to serve the country and implicitly signal their intention to align with the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship. This suggests that posthumous citizenship is not an imposition but rather an acknowledgment of their wishes and a fulfillment of their expressed intent to become citizens (Damon, 2022). In this light, the government's decision to grant citizenship posthumously affirms the significance of their service to the nation. Another compelling argument within critical scholarship on migration and citizenship suggests that, in certain cases, death forces states to recognize the humanity of migrants and bestow upon them a form of posthumous citizenship (Luca Mavelli and Zambernardi, 2024). This recognition, often absent during their lives, becomes a means for the state to retroactively acknowledge their contributions, granting them a measure of dignity and belonging that was previously denied.

War Effort Capitalization of Marginalized Groups and POC in the Military

Reliance on immigrant and indigenous populations for strategic military purposes has deep historical roots. During World War I, Choctaw Native Americans were employed as code talkers to transmit secure battlefield messages, marking an early use of linguistic diversity for tactical advantage (Copenhaver, 2014; Dahl, 2016). In World War II, the U.S. military expanded this strategy, enlisting Navajo Nation members to create an unbreakable communications network, leveraging the unwritten and complex nature of the Navajo language to outmaneuver Japanese cryptologists in the Pacific theater (Copenhaver, 2014; Dahl, 2016). These efforts underscore the critical role marginalized groups played in national security. Despite earlier government efforts to suppress indigenous languages and cultures, the war forced the military to recognize the value of the Navajo language, which proved invaluable on the battlefield. Although the success of the Navajo code talkers led to some reduction in overt racism during the war, discrimination persisted, and their contributions went largely unrecognized post-war (Dahl, 2016).

While the public was aware of the Navajo's involvement in the war effort, full recognition of their contributions remained elusive for many years. Their acceptance, like that of Native Americans more broadly, seemed temporary, tied to the needs of wartime (Copenhaver, 2014; Dahl, 2016). After the conflict ended, the Choctaw and Navajo code talkers—who played crucial roles in securing U.S. victories—were largely forgotten. The full recognition of the Choctaw and Navajo code talkers came only decades later. It wasn't until 2000 that Congress passed legislation to formally honor the Navajo code talkers, culminating in a ceremony in 2001 where one remarked, "Just maybe, just maybe, I have become an American citizen" (Dahl, 2016; Meadows, 2011). This statement captures the long struggle for recognition faced by these

groups. This delayed recognition reflects a pattern of historical oversight concerning the contributions of marginalized communities in U.S. military history. Despite their invaluable service, the roles of the code talkers were minimized in post-war narratives, illustrating ongoing societal struggles in properly acknowledging the sacrifices and achievements of these groups (Dahl, 2016). Their story highlights the complex relationship between patriotism, service, and the often fleeting recognition given to individuals from historically oppressed communities.

The Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) Program

The tension between service and conditional acceptance remains evident in contemporary military initiatives involving foreign-born recruits. Offering a striking modern parallel—in 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates authorized the Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) program, launching it as a one-year pilot initiative that allowed non-citizens with critical skills to enlist in the U.S. Armed Forces. Immigrants bring a unique set of knowledge and experiences that natural-born citizens may lack. Bilingual individuals process information differently from those who speak only one language. Studies indicate that the ability to switch between languages enhances cognitive functions, leading to more deliberate thinking and rational decision-making (Costa & Sebastián-Gallés, 2014). The Army aimed to maximize the effective utilization of soldiers through the MAVNI program. This initiative was designed to strategically leverage the specialized skills and linguistic abilities of noncitizen recruits, ensuring that their unique talents were optimally employed in roles critical to national security and military operations (Lorenzen, 2011). By doing so, the Army sought to enhance its operational capabilities while also providing a pathway for these soldiers to earn U.S. citizenship (Damon, 2022; Lorenzen, 2011). Soldiers who possess an understanding of cultural nuances and are

equipped with the skills to operate effectively in uncertain and complex environments are invaluable, as their expertise directly enhances the commander's situational awareness. Non-citizen soldiers, in particular, offer an insider perspective. Their familiarity with different customs and regional dynamics can provide critical insights, making them indispensable assets in adapting to evolving battlefields and achieving mission success (Lorenzen, 2011). This approach was aimed at building a force with varied competencies in critical areas, ensuring that the military could effectively meet the complex demands of modern warfare (Lorenzen, 2011). To further enhance and capitalize on greater diversity, the program was expanded in 2010: however, soon after, changes were implemented to the security and suitability screening process (Garamone, 2017). Previously, individuals could begin basic training while their background investigations were underway. The revised requirement mandated that the background checks be completed prior to the start of training, leading to significant backlogs. In some cases, delays extended up to a year, affecting the program's efficiency and causing frustration among recruits and military officials alike (Barros, 2020; Garamone, 2017).

In 2017, the Trump administration further altered the requirements for applicants seeking a pathway to citizenship through military enlistment to include the successful completion of basic combat training, a minimum of 180 consecutive active-duty service days or at least one year in the reserves, and pass a thorough background check (Barros, 2020). The policy change led to delays in the citizenship acquisition process, hindering many non-citizens from advancing their careers, as more specialized occupations were reserved for individuals with security clearances; a privilege exclusive to U.S. citizens (*Samma V. U.S. Department of Defense*, 2021). Non-citizens were also afforded less protection than their citizen counterparts while serving and placed at a heightened risk of deportation. The ripple effect on the MAVNI Program left

immigrant recruits in a state of limbo; with promised contracts unfulfilled and loss of legal status that ensued (Antohi, 2021). This is directly in line with Lisa Marie Cacho's *Social Death*; the discovery not necessarily serving as a unique or isolated incident, but rather following an already well-known permanence of immigrants' ineligibility to personhood, even if they serve in the military. Within this context, individuals that occupy uncertain legal statuses are rendered rightless and become targets of differential inclusion irrespective of the ultimate sacrifices (Cacho, 2012). Notions of meritocracy and objectivity mask the invalidated and misrepresented narratives of the foreign-born. The landscape of privilege in the United States has always been conspicuous through unequal apportionment of rights that emanate from racial components and motivations (Mills, 1997). Therefore, immigrant social worthiness (or the lack thereof) is contingent upon the presumptions of their collective ethnic inferiority and US-born superiority (Cacho, 2012).

In response to the 2017 policy changes, six non-citizen service members initiated a class-action lawsuit, claiming that the new legislation had a detrimental effect on their military careers and obstructed their pathways to U.S. citizenship. The plaintiffs argued that the policy not only disrupted their time in service but also hindered their long-term aspirations. It was alleged that the Department of Defense had implemented an unlawful policy by depriving service members of the expedited naturalization process, ultimately denying thousands of uniformed men and women the citizenship they had been promised (Barros, 2020; *Samma V. U.S. Department of Defense*, 2021). The case contended that the military's actions violated the recruits' rights to due process and fair treatment. In 2020, the court ruled in favor of the service members, but the Trump administration quickly appealed the decision. Since then, the appeal has not been publicly addressed, and the court's ruling has not led to any policy changes (*Samma V.*

U.S. Department of Defense, 2021). The lack of comment on the appeal and the absence of implementation of the ruling into policy have left the situation unresolved, with the legal and procedural challenges continuing to impact the affected service members. As of 2025, immigrant recruits, to include those previously eligible under MAVNI, are navigating an increasingly restrictive environment. There are no signs of the program's revival; instead, updated policies have further limited foreign-born participation in the military through intensified immigration enforcement. For instance, Executive Order 14183, *Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness*, signed in January 2025, directed the Department of Defense to bar individuals from serving if their gender identity differs from the assigned sex at birth (Randall, 2025). That same month, Executive Order 14159, *Protecting the American People Against Invasion*, called for expedited removal procedures, restricted federal funding in certain jurisdictions, and imposed harsher penalties on undocumented individuals (*Executive Order on Enforcement of U.S. Immigration Laws*, 2025). These developments point to a broader pattern of narrowing eligibility criteria, access, and opportunities for immigrants across military service and beyond.

Lieutenant Colonel Margaret Stock, the architect of MAVNI, an immigration attorney, and West Point Professor, recommended focusing on recruiting non-citizens because this approach had been a common practice during previous wars (Lorenzen, 2011). She highlighted that historically, the U.S. had regularly relied on foreign-born individuals during times of conflict, drawing on their skills and commitment to bolster the nation's military efforts. By targeting this demographic, the military could tap into a well-established source of manpower, as it had successfully done in the past (Lorenzen, 2011). However, throughout its duration, MAVNI recruits were held to higher standards than regular U.S. Army recruits. A service member's immigration status is immediately jeopardized if their naturalization is revoked following a

discharge under other than honorable conditions (Lee & Wasem, 2009). It was noted that some veterans reported they were not adequately informed about the necessity of filing paperwork with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to finalize their citizenship process (Lee & Wasem, 2009). Many mistakenly believed that enlistment alone was sufficient for obtaining U.S. citizenship, leading to gaps in their legal status that left them vulnerable to deportation (Lee & Wasem, 2009). Additionally, the program barred visa overstays and individuals who had fallen out of status from enlisting, and did not grant conduct waivers to MAVNI recruits in the same way as it did for U.S. citizens or Lawful Permanent Residents (Lorenzen, 2011).

Moreover, while U.S. citizens can enlist in any Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) for which they meet the qualifications, non-citizens are restricted from enlisting in MOSs that require a security clearance, which greatly limits their available options. This limitation significantly narrows the range of opportunities available to non-citizen recruits, preventing them from pursuing a number of critical or specialized positions within the military (Lorenzen, 2011). Due to the aforementioned reasons, Special Operations Forces are unable to employ MAVNI recruits, leaving them to be confined to interpreter roles (Lorenzen, 2011). While this allows recruits to provide vital language skills in the field, it also restricts their broader operational prospectives due to the lack of security clearances. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, hundreds of interpreters were abandoned, with many subsequently killed due to their inability to apply for visas or due to severe delays in the visa-processing system. Since the U.S. exit, their situation has been characterized by growing fear and dwindling hopes of escape. Immigrants are frequently sold on impressive opportunities, promotion bonuses, and significant

military roles, but due to their status, they are unable to fulfill these commitments, resulting in broken promises and unrealized potential.

Furthermore, Stock emphasized significant concerns about the military's management of background checks, bringing these issues to the forefront (Bolger, 2018; Damon, 2022). She reported that the military has mandated several new investigatory requirements that it has been unable to complete, leading to the administrative discharge of many recruits from the program (Damon, 2022). According to Stock, the military's response has been to dismiss these individuals rather than address the complexities of their cases (Bolger, 2018). Many recruits were released with vague explanations citing "national security reasons," leaving them without any recourse to challenge the decision. Stock contends that this practice breaches military regulations, which stipulate that individuals discharged on security grounds must be notified and provided an opportunity to contest the findings (Bolger, 2018). Furthermore, Stock emphasizes that such procedural shortcomings undermine the fairness and integrity of the military's recruitment and discharge processes, potentially affecting the rights and futures of those involved.

The United States welcomed 625,400 new citizens according to the USCIS Naturalization Statistics for the fiscal year 2020. Of these, only 0.6 percent, representing 4,570 individuals, gained citizenship through military service designators (Damon, 2022; *Naturalization Statistics | USCIS*, 2021). The steep decline in naturalization through military enlistment can be attributed to the Trump administration's suspension of the MAVNI program, which significantly impacted the number of recruits. This reduction reflects broader challenges faced by non-citizen service members in achieving naturalization under the current policy environment (Damon, 2022). The drop in immigrant enlistments poses a challenge to military readiness and national security, as many MAVNI recruits possess proficiency in one of the several critical languages (Damon,

2022). This shortfall is particularly concerning given the need for increased fighting capacity, especially in light of ongoing retention issues (Kapp, 2002).

Knowledge of the MAVNI program remains significantly limited, with many people unfamiliar with its existence or the opportunities it offered (Lorenzen, 2011). Despite its potential to recruit highly skilled individuals, the program did not receive widespread recognition, resulting in a lack of understanding about its purpose and impact it could have had within both military and civilian communities.

Theoretical Framework

The study contributes to the ongoing work on immigration, national identity, and military inclusion. It draws on *Social Contract Theory,* which provides a foundational lens for understanding the MAVNI program's functional and symbolic value (Tienda, 2002). By enlisting in the armed services, foreign-born recruits agree to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States in exchange for the promise of legal recognition and belonging. This implicit agreement echoes the social contract, in which MAVNIs consent to mutual obligations under a governing authority (Tienda, 2002). The act of swearing allegiance through military service represents a powerful form of civic commitment, one that reflects the program participant's desire to fully integrate into the American polity. However, *Critical Race Theory* complicates this exchange by revealing how race and legal status intersect to structure differential access to inclusion (Romero, 2008). This perspective challenges the assumption that U.S. citizenship is equally distributed, underscoring how racialized immigrant groups, particularly those seen as strategically useful but perpetually foreign are disproportionately impacted. The suspension of MAVNI, despite its initial success attracting highly skilled individuals, suggests that

foreign-born contributions are subject to the shifting tides of national security discourse. The study also builds on the work of Rebecca Chávez's (2017) concept of *Militarized Citizenship*, which frames the Department of Defense as a key gatekeeper in the allocation of rights and immigrant incorporation. Chávez argues that government initiatives and programs like MAVNI exemplify how the state militarizes pathways to citizenship. This framework exposes the transactional nature of how foreign-born individuals are integrated into the military, highlighting how immigrant recruits are often expected to outperform native-born counterparts while being subjected to increased scrutiny and heightened surveillance, all in exchange for the uncertain prospect of naturalization. MAVNI serves as a critical case study illustrating the convergence of racial hierarchy and national security within contemporary U.S. policy.

Methodology

Researcher Positionality

Examining researcher positionality is a crucial factor of conducting content analysis on MAVNI and I find it important to share how I arrived at this research. I was born in Chelyabinsk Oblast, Russia, and immigrated to the United States at the age of nine. Like many immigrant children, I grew up navigating the complexities of identity and cultural adaptation. After my freshman year of college, I sought to deepen my commitment to the country I now called home by enlisting in the Rhode Island Army National Guard as a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Specialist. Military service offered both a path toward naturalization and a way to anchor my place in American society. Throughout my enlisted time, I seized every opportunity that came my way. Yet, I also encountered bureaucratic obstacles and inconsistencies within the system. These experiences—both inspiring and frustrating—shaped the foundation of

my research. I embarked on this project to not only explore policy gaps, but to contribute to a largely underrepresented area of scholarship. This work is driven by a desire to elevate the voices of those like myself and to advocate for more equitable, transparent, and supportive paths to citizenship for foreign-born recruits.

Content Analysis Background

Prasad defines content analysis as "... a scientific study of content communication. It is the study of the content with reference to the meanings, contexts, and intentions contained in messages" (2008:1). It is firmly rooted in the exploration of how messages are constructed, disseminated, and interpreted in broader society. It quantifies thematic patterns that emerge from undertaking a close reading of the text, allowing insights into cultural shifts and social issues (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Extensive literature highlights significant disparities in news coverage; therefore, "analysis of news media content is used to study how the distribution of news sources, gatekeeping, agenda-setting and agenda-building, framing, and priming explain the functions of news in the context of daily politics, elections, and civic engagement in democratic societies (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Most importantly, content analysis is valued for its ability to validate findings on delicate topics like the Military Accessions Vital to National Interest (MAVNI) Program through alternative research methods (Prasad, 2008). Many MAVNI recruits who were open to sharing their experiences have already done so through interviews with news outlets. Those who initially chose not to speak on this matter are unlikely to change their stance on participating, especially considering the sensitive nature of immigration status, security clearances, and personal risk due to repercussions. Therefore, content analysis enables the examination of narratives and discourse patterns without requiring direct engagement with

recruits themselves. However, Prasad admits to limitations such as divergence from conventional approaches and contextual complexity; causing meaning of specific text or analyzed media to be dependent on when it was produced and how it was received (2008).

For this research, I began data collection by employing Google News to identify and gather newspaper articles relevant to the study. I used the search terms *'MAVNI Program'* and *'Military Accessions Vital to National Interest'* which initially yielded a broad range of relevant material. Over a two-week period, I conducted a systematic review of the 82 Google News articles published during the tenure of the MAVNI program. Through this process, I reduced the dataset to 48 articles by eliminating duplicates and sources that vaguely referenced MAVNI without offering substantive content. This process of refinement resulted in a final set of news articles that were pertinent to the research focus. To supplement the news media data, I also conducted a search on HeinOnline, a multidisciplinary platform for government research. It houses over 232 million pages of content and integrates advanced artificial intelligence tools to enhance discoverability of legal resources. Once again, the search for the term *"MAVNI"* generated 74 results across all databases. Of those, only 23 were accessible and were subsequently included for further analysis, with just 12 ultimately selected for coding. The small number of usable congressional reports reflects the relative obscurity of the MAVNI program, making it difficult to locate comprehensive information. More specifically, to determine the presence of overarching themes concerning non-citizens serving in the United States military, I examined all new stories and congressional documents from the program's authorization by the Department of Defense in November 2008 through its expiration in September of 2017. This nine-year period allowed for the emergence of meaningful trends within the data. Although the

number of sources was limited, the extended time frame made up for the deficit and allowed for the development of new insights into how MAVNI was discussed and portrayed.

Given the complexity of the analysis, much of the work was iterative, requiring me to retrace prior steps, revisit decisions, and repeatedly refine my approach along the way. I maintained an expansive online document, serving as a centralized hub for recording key details such as article titles, author names, publication dates, and URLs. Once the dataset was complete, I collaborated with my faculty mentor to develop a codebook. Initially, inductive coding was employed, allowing for themes to emerge naturally from the text. Then, first-cycle coding was used to reduce the data, which was immediately followed by second-cycle coding to refine the categories and ensure consistency across the dataset. This process unfolded over several coding rounds conducted in Google Docs, and took a few hours to clean and fully establish. For inter-coder reliability, my mentor and I compared our interpretations, resolved any discrepancies, and finalized the list of codes—each with corresponding sub-codes and clear definitions. Additionally, this back-and-forth dialogue aided in making sense of the data. I paid close attention not only to the code frequency, but also to contextual relevance. Tracking recurring patterns and how specific themes were framed allowed language to be analyzed on multiple levels. Individual words, two-word segments, full phrases, and even entire sentences were carefully examined to capture nuanced meaning revolving around the program's origins, structural flaws, and implementation missteps. Reaching this depth was made possible through content analysis, which offers several advantages due to its unobtrusive nature. It is particularly useful for its ability to interpret media messages, manage large sample sizes, ensure replicability, and produce reliable findings (Krippendorff, 2018). At the same time, conducting this type of

research also comes with limitations. Content analysis can be extremely time consuming, reductive, and tends to involve a level of subjective interpretation (Maier, 2017). Nonetheless, the scope and accessibility of digital content helped alleviate some of the previously mentioned challenges by enabling the collection of a sufficient volume of relevant material using just one search term.

Content Analysis of Congressional Documents, Reports, and Documentation of Program Implementation

Several researchers have adopted similar approaches when analyzing the impact of immigration-related policies; taking a particular interest in the scope of restrictive content and its ripple effects on foreign-born individuals (Guzi et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2024; Nayak et al., 2024; Ortiz et al., 2021; USCRI, 2025; Xu, 2020). As such, the media becomes of vital importance in the context of MAVNI, given the absence of direct access to many program participants who were subjected to contract delays, opaque vetting processes, and in most cases, sudden discharges without explanation. Therefore, such administrative failures directly undermine the historic precedent of using military service as a trusted pathway to citizenship. Moreover, MAVNI's prioritization of enlisting foreign-born recruits with strategic language skills while overlooking Spanish speakers despite their prevalence, exposes the selective militarization of immigration policy. This preference is indicative of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian calculus—a framework that measures immigrant value by their operational outputs rather than broader contributions to the armed forces (Mariani, 2024). Such selective recruitment criteria reinforces narratives that instrumentalize foreign-born participants, reducing them to geopolitical accessories, rather than recognizing their full civic potential and personhood (Cacho, 2012).

Understanding the various ways in which the media frames MAVNI is crucial, as framing significantly influences public perception of both the program and its participants. According to Freyenberger (2013), the multifaceted nature of framing shapes how the audience interprets information through subtle choices in presentation and emphasis. This can either obscure or bring to light the systemic injustices embedded within the MAVNI program. Individuals often accept media narratives at face value, forming opinions based on the information presented, regardless of its accuracy or factual basis (Freyenberger, 2013). The media's role in shaping public discourse is powerful, as it can raise salience by highlighting certain aspects of a story, while downplaying or omitting others, thereby guiding the audience's interpretation of events (Freyenberger, 2013). This makes critical assessment of media narratives necessary for unpacking how trust among MAVNI recruits was eroded. When news outlets report on claims without discernment, they risk legitimizing flawed policies and give credence to wider bureaucratic mishandling of recruits' cases. Ultimately, media coverage serves not only as a valuable secondary source for understanding the program and its treatment of recruits, but also as a lens through which the complex interplay between public policy, journalism, and societal attitudes toward foreign-born participants is revealed.

Through methodical review of news media coverage, we gain insight into citizenship pathways for non-citizens in military service, naturalization provisions, executive orders for service members, and recent policy changes that put foreign-born veterans at risk of deportation. The qualitative nature of content analysis focuses on deciphering the symbolic construction of sociocultural factors; with a particular interest in content that can be stored, preserved, accessed, and retrieved (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Therefore, looking at organizational and institutional

documentation, such as congressional testimony, can identify overlapping themes and provide the basis for common ground across each computer-based source (Malici & Smith, 2018). Seeking convergence using different approaches can corroborate findings throughout numerous data sets and provide a confluence of evidence.

The work of this study rested on the research method of content analysis. The project posited that media outlets painted immigrants in a negative light, irrespective of their military service contributions to the United States. Furthermore, looking at other documents that covered the MAVNI program as it pertained to immigrants' participation in the military, allowed for the comparison of how immigrant service members were framed by various actors around the program. All data for this project was gathered electronically and aimed to understand MAVNI through various societal interlocutors. Through coding of patterns and capturing notable attributes of news stories and document segments, I assessed trends in the framing, reception, and implementation of the MAVNI program.

My research is heavily influenced by the comparative study conducted by David Weaver and Bruce Bimber, which examines the distinctions between Google News and LexisNexis as sources of information retrieval. Within the social sciences, LexisNexis is a long-established tool that has been the predominant archive for academic research due to its extensive collection of global news articles, legal documents, and other primary sources (Weaver & Bimber, 2008). LexisNexis provides access to approximately 300 newspapers and around 500 general print publications, encompassing nearly all major metropolitan newspapers, mid-size market outlets, smaller regional papers, and transcripts across the United States (Weaver & Bimber, 2008).

However, as the structure of the news industry continues to evolve, several issues have emerged regarding the accuracy of the content found in these databases. Studies have highlighted problems such as the truncation of articles, inconsistencies in the way headlines are captured, and even the outright exclusion of certain material from the archives (Weaver & Bimber, 2008). These discrepancies can lead to significant variations between the original published content and the versions available in databases like LexisNexis. Such challenges raise important questions about the preservation of media content and the integrity of archival collections in the digital age - impacting the quality and reliability of research that depends on these sources. In contrast, Google News functions as an alternative news aggregator that compiles headlines and articles from various online publications. The decision to incorporate Google News in my work stems from its wide-reaching impact, attracting approximately nine million unique users each month, thereby offering broader insights into public access to news and the potential for real-time media consumption patterns (Weaver & Bimber, 2008).

Lacy and his colleagues (2015) present a comprehensive framework for conducting content analysis, which I aim to incorporate into my own research. Their approach begins with the creation of a detailed written protocol, designed to be shared with other researchers, ensuring transparency and the facilitation of result replication. This protocol serves as a structured guideline, providing coders with clear instructions on how to categorize and assign values to specific content units (Lacy et al., 2015). By establishing consistent coding standards, the methodology enhances the reliability of findings and allows for comparison across different studies (Lacy et al., 2015). The emphasis on precision is crucial, as it ensures that the coding process is both systematic and reproducible, a key element for credible content analysis. Lacy

and his colleagues also emphasize the importance of monitoring the duration of the coding process to ensure consistent reliability. When coding takes place over an extended period, it is imperative for researchers to periodically reassess the coding to confirm that it remains accurate; helping guard against drift in the interpretation (Lacy et al., 2015). Additionally, they recommend that researchers provide detailed reporting on the number of coders involved in the study, who supervised the coding process, and how the coding workload was distributed (Lacy et al., 2015). Specifically, it is important to disclose what proportion of the coding was conducted by the principal investigator versus other coders. This level of transparency not only strengthens the credibility of the research but also offers insights into the division of labor, which can affect the consistency and integrity of the data analysis.

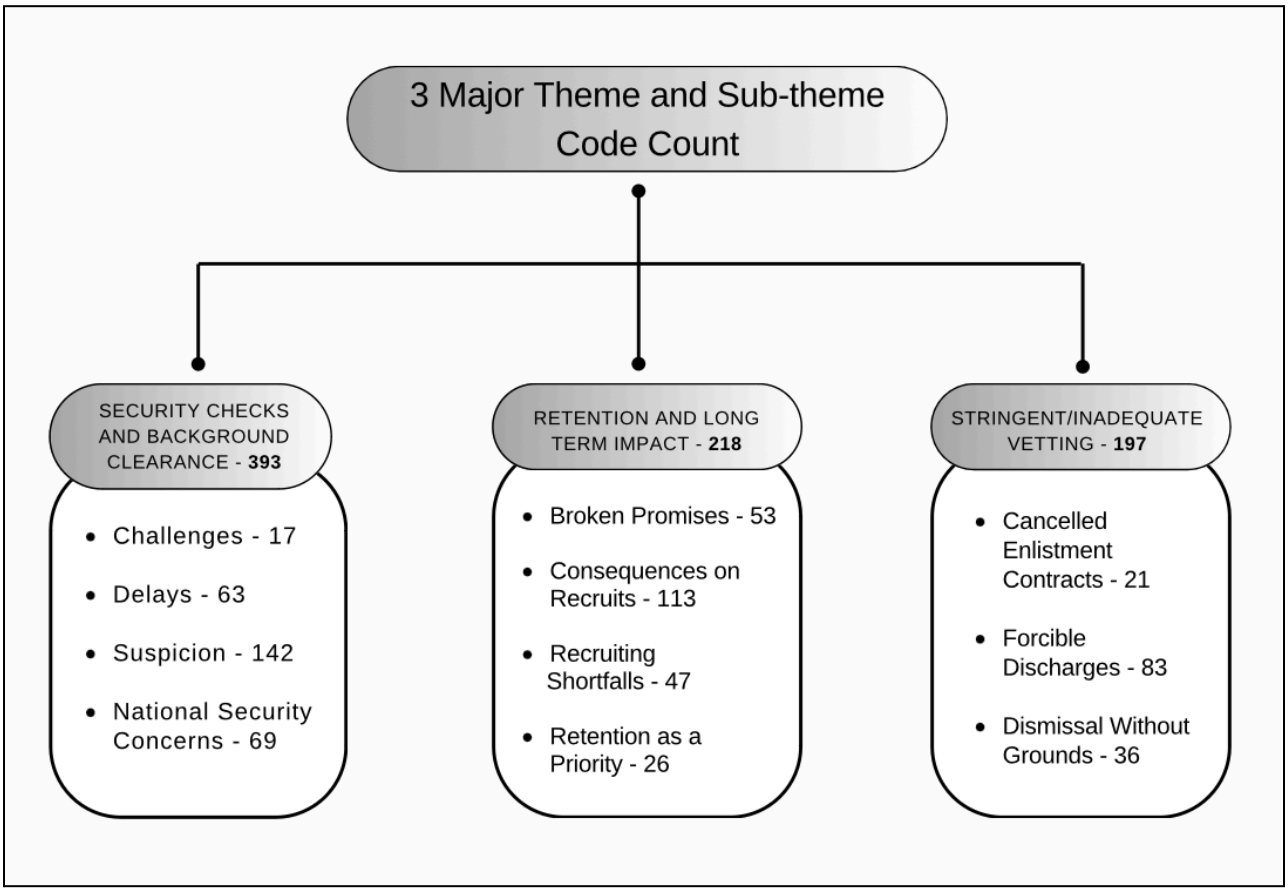
The focus of Mwangi's study revolves around the application of clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, which has provided valuable guidance for refining my selection of articles specific to MAVNI (George Mwangi et al., 2018). Mwangi and her colleagues further structure their data analysis through the use of memos, which summarize key elements of each article, including its purpose, year of publication, and main insights. This approach highlights the importance of outlining the scope of each article, with an emphasis on decisive aspects such as vocabulary, tone, concepts employed, and the overall content (George Mwangi et al., 2018). By emphasizing these components, their methodology provides a comprehensive and organized approach to analyzing relevant articles, which proves invaluable when it comes to systematically categorizing and assessing material for crafting my own thesis. Following a similarly structured framework has the potential to enhance the clarity of my analysis, enabling me to effectively

narrow down the critical lens of my choice and focus on key sources that align with the specific objectives of my research on the MAVNI Program.

Findings

My analysis identified three prominent themes: Security Checks and Background Clearance (393), Retention and Long Term Impact (218), and Stringent/Inadequate Vetting (197). The accompanying graphic highlights sub-themes with smaller coded instances as well, illustrating their influence in shaping the broader categories. The first theme underscores the extensive verification process MAVNI recruits undergo, resulting in prolonged delays (63) fueled by both nativist sentiments and suspicion (142). The emphasis on national security concerns (69) suggests that investigatory procedures function less as practical risk assessments and more as barriers that disproportionately impact foreign-born recruits. Additionally, challenges (17) reflect bureaucratic and logistical setbacks that MAVNI program participants face by default. The second theme focuses on broken promises (53), exposing the military's failure to uphold enlistment agreements. The consequences on recruits (113) extend beyond the waiting period, manifesting in the forms of stalled career progression, legal uncertainty, and disillusionment. Moreover, recruiting shortfalls (47) demonstrate how specific government proposed actions hinder manpower needs and exacerbate retention struggles (26). The third theme encapsulates the paradox of vetting procedures that are overly stringent and inadequately executed. Cancelled enlistment contracts (21) indicate abrupt policy shifts—prematurely ending military endeavors before they even begin. Meanwhile, forcible discharges (83) and dismissals without grounds (36) have been unfairly utilized for the removal of MAVNIs despite their prior clearances. The code counts accentuate that heightened scrutiny does not necessarily enhance security, but rather

breeds distrust and instability. These interconnected themes align with the literature, and I discuss each in detail in the following sections.



Security Checks and Background Clearance

I define the ***Security Checks and Background Clearance*** parent code as persistent delays and rigorous vetting procedures that adversely affect enlistment and recruit morale. Literature on foreign-born recruitment underscores a long history of both opportunity and restriction. Research by Wong (2017) and Stock (2019) suggests that while immigrant service members bolster military capability, periods of heightened national security concerns have contributed to disproportionate scrutiny. Chishti and his colleagues provide insights into the intensified vetting

and post-9/11 policies that effectively stalled MAVNIs. This pattern aligns with even earlier examples of exclusionary government trends—tracing back to Irish and German immigrants during World War I, and Japanese American soldiers in World War II, who faced suspicion despite their service (Ngai, 2004). Consequently, scholars have voiced that such close examination of newly arrived foreign-born recruits is less about actual security risks and more indicative of fluctuating political sentiments and polarization (Motomura, 2014). Furthermore, Bigo's (2002) work brings securitization theory to the forefront—not only converging with the previously discussed literature, but also asserting that government entities, such as the Department of Defense and the Department of Homeland Security, impose risk assessments on marginalized groups during periods of perceived crisis. Therefore, the appearance of this theme 393 times, sheds light on the central role that screening procedures play in the enlistment process for MAVNI recruits. The high frequency of this theme highlights microscopic review program participants undergo before they can proceed with military service.

For many immigrants, the enlistment route is a decisive statement of allegiance, and the ultimate way to demonstrate their dedication to the country that they hope will become their permanent home. A profound sense of attachment is underscored, even if the bond felt by immigrants is not reflected by their legal standing within American society. Even though non-citizen soldiers exhibit a selfless readiness to fulfill the demands that come with military duty, they fall short of attaining the very rights that they protect. Immigrant service members grapple with the contradiction highlighted by **Politico: "... People who are willing to die for their country are still fighting to call themselves American citizens."** This quote omits the normative distinction of host and native country, implying that to immigrant recruits the United States *is* their country. In doing so, the perception that MAVNIs seek only a temporary

relationship with the U.S. is challenged, as recruits' sense of belonging is framed as transcending the legal processes that continue to deny them a streamlined path to citizenship. Such a contradiction is indicative of the current dissonance between the commitment of MAVNI recruits and practical investigatory procedures to determine their suitability. This suggests that, regardless of displayed immigrant loyalty through extreme actions (i.e. willingness to die for their adoptive country), there are systemic barriers in place that disadvantage foreign-born recruits. These findings speak to immigrant contributions in the form of the ultimate sacrifice not always being sufficient to secure full inclusion and reflect a deeper pattern witnessed in the treatment of colonial troops by imperial powers. As African soldiers in the French colonial army (Ginio, 2013; Fogarty, 2008), Algerian Harkis (Crapanzano, 2011), and Moroccan recruits in Spain (Al Tuma, 2011); Bolorinos Allard, 2016) were heavily relied upon for their strategic utility, they also shouldered the burdens of military service. Today, foreign-born soldiers face a similar paradox—they are celebrated for their loyalty, yet legal recognition remains elusive. The dissonance between their service under MAVNI and the lack of institutional legitimacy reveals how national belonging continues to be selectively granted, even within the military, a space often idealized as a great equalizer.

Despite the differential treatment and added layers of systemic barriers, many MAVNI program participants are committed to staying the course to enlistment; remaining resolute in their decision to attain citizenship through military service. When discussing unwavering immigrant resolve, one recruit's perspective exemplifies this dedication, **"I was ready to go wherever they wanted to send me," he said. "If they said the Middle East, I was down with going to the Middle East" (Task and Purpose).** The MAVNI soldier's mention of deploying to a region of instability and rapid escalation sheds light on a twofold burden—not only carrying

the weight of proving their worth as citizens-in-waiting, but facing the toll of a high-stakes combat environment. There is a stark disparity between the United States' reliance on the sacrifices of non-citizen soldiers and the harsh reality of their struggle for full integration into the nation they serve so selflessly.

Instead of serving as a fast track to citizenship, MAVNI dashed the hopes of countless recruits. A twenty-five year old program participant, who immigrated from Brazil at the age of six and has never left the United States since, described his predicament, **"I have spent the past 18 months with about a thousand other people like me enlisted in the military in one of the worst kinds of limbo I can imagine: waiting for my military basic training to start, but facing the possibility that the country I've sworn to die protecting might deport me" (Politico).** The speaker's situation reveals that skilled immigrants were trapped in lengthy waits, sometimes lasting months or even years. Their progress derailed and abruptly halted, leaving non-citizen recruits unable to move forward in their naturalization process due to policy changes, administrative failures, and systemic barriers. Despite pledging allegiance and eagerly anticipating their ship date to boot camp, many recruits faced the looming threat of deportation due to delays on a case-by-case basis or changes to their legal status. The broader implications involve recruits putting their faith into a system that sold them on inclusion and opportunity, only to find themselves alienated and abandoned. Their treatment as expendable not only defies the core principles of reciprocity and fairness on which MAVNI was built, but also dilutes its original purpose and erodes the program's integrity. When the government fails to deliver on its commitments, it undermines trust among skilled non-citizens who are longing to contribute to the United States' defense. Denying immigrant enlistees the promise of citizenship reinforces feelings of exclusion and relegates them to the permanence of second class. For many,

citizenship acquisition is not just an embodiment of the *American Dream*, it is a necessity—and as scrutiny intensifies, the resulting uncertainty permeates every aspect of day-to-day life.

Vetting efforts that include comprehensive investigations spanning at least a decade of financial and educational history, exhaustive questionnaires, and lengthy, in-depth interviews probing personal and professional connections leave recruits feeling **"improperly stalled"** according to **New York Times.** As a result of this static process, MAVNI program participants are overwhelmed and overburdened—as it fails to bring them any closer to actually starting their service. While criminal background evaluations and rigorous checks aim to ensure national security, such measures often foster helplessness and mounting frustration. Despite enduring far greater scrutiny than their U.S. born counterparts, not a single news article in the dataset covers a security breach by MAVNIs that would warrant prosecutorial actions or prompt removal proceedings. Whereas public records reveal that U.S. born soldiers, who undergo far less vetting, have been implicated in major security protocol violations. For example, take former Massachusetts Air National Guard member, Jack Teixeira, who sparked significant controversy by leaking highly classified documents about the war in Ukraine (NPR, 2024). The inconsistency of military citizenship and immigration services of the United States becomes even more apparent when considering the added layers of evaluation. As **10TV.Com** explains, **"In fact, a requirement for enlistment in the MAVNI program is that the soldier have lawful immigrant status. That means – for most of them – that they already had to be screened by DHS just to get their student or other visas before they enlisted."** As if undergoing multiple background checks by numerous agencies isn't already overwhelming, the process includes counterintelligence interviews, polygraph tests, and repeated biometric screenings, all considered essential. In one case reported by the *Military Times* (2020), a recruit who had already passed

DHS visa protocols was subjected to a comprehensive threat assessment and a second round of fingerprinting, resulting in a delay of over a year. During this period, his visa expired—an outcome shared by many MAVNIs—and due to the overstay, he became ineligible for further military consideration. The duplicative and redundant nature of vetting standards impose an undue burden on MAVNI recruits. The convoluted process of a disjointed system resembles a game of interagency telephone, exacerbated by conflicting directives and miscommunication. To make matters worse and without a clear indication as to why, **“The Army flagged many of them as security risks, even when other federal agencies had cleared them for more sensitive jobs in the civilian world” (NYT).** News articles point to contradictory decisions and mismanagement on behalf of federal institutions; especially since some recruits hold top security clearance positions in sectors that require the handling of classified information.

Margaret Stock, now an immigration attorney, illuminates the unintended consequences of ramped up vetting and security investigation criteria, which have become virtually **“impossible to meet” (NY Post.Com)**. Ordering more background checks than the government could process within a feasible time frame, created a massive bottleneck. Therefore, the imbalance between limited capabilities, such as the insufficient number of personnel to complete investigations, and the increased demand for screening, prevents eligible recruits from fulfilling their enlistment commitments. Rather than invest in solving the backlogs, the government appeared to adopt a controversial approach of discharging recruits-in-waiting. A critique of the proposed solution was outlined later in the same publication, which described the actions as **"suspicious"** and **“... a classic thing the bureaucracy does when they are trying to cover-up wrongdoing” (NY Post.Com)**. Stock asserts that the discharges were justified under the pretext that MAVNI recruits failed vaguely defined security protocols. However, these failures stemmed

from delays, rather than any genuine disqualifying factors. Instead of addressing the underlying bureaucratic issues, the U.S. government opted to sever the ties. The handling of MAVNIs by the Department of Defense conveys that the mere act of being a foreign national is perceived as inherently suspicious. Numerous MAVNI enlistees pointed out that, **"... they've been told only that they failed an unspecified background check—the tightening restrictions on immigrants in the military…fits perfectly with the administration's anti-immigrant and nativist policies" (Vox).** Given this, the invocation of loosely defined national security concerns, enables the DoD to sidestep detailed justification for the mass discharge of recruits. The avoided transparency, coupled with the significant number of dismissals, is presented as an act of bureaucratic self-preservation. Defined and motivated by a narrow interpretation of American identity, this governmental dereliction aligns with a broader nationalist agenda—which promotes and protects the interests of native-born individuals over those of immigrants. By portraying foreign-born recruits as security red flags fuels both nativist sentiments and perpetuates an "us versus them" narrative. This tactic of casting suspicion on foreign-born soldiers has historical precedence. As Ginio (2013) underscores in her study of African recruitment into the French colonial army, military propaganda often depicted African soldiers as simultaneously essential and enigmatic, necessary for manpower but never fully trusted. Similarly, Al Tuma (2011) and Bolorinos (2016) document how Moroccan troops recruited during the Spanish Civil War were praised for their avail, while being depicted through racialized and religiously charged stereotypes that emphasized their otherness. In the French context, Crapanzano (2011) shows how Algerian Harkis were extensively overworked, only to be abandoned and stigmatized after the Algerian War. Fogarty (2008) further denotes that even during World War I, colonial troops were subjected to racialized hierarchies that questioned their loyalty and humanity despite their

service. These patterns of selectively banking on, while systematically excluding immigrant recruits, are echoed in today's treatment of MAVNIs.

Nevertheless, military doctrine specifies that individuals have the right to be informed of the reasons behind their cancelled contracts. Therefore, the absence of notification and **"opportunity to contest the findings"** of ambiguous decisions deprives recruits of due process **(NPR)**. Consequently, it is the military that is in violation, as the result of its inability to adhere and comply with pre established regulations. The widespread DoD failure to follow their own rules makes the discharges procedurally unjust. Moreover, Stock describes the vetting process as chaotic and **"out of control,"** cutting through the DoD's strategy of deflecting responsibility for its missteps, all while sacrificing the skilled immigrant recruits that the program was intended to benefit **(NY Post.Com)**. More alarmingly, **"... the latest memos confirm that the DoD has ended the program permanently, since the program can't function with these new rules … [and] no sane or rational immigrant would enlist under the new rules that the DoD has imposed" (NBC).** Stock points out the government's unwillingness to take accountability for operational shortcomings scuttled the MAVNI program.

From the outset, some individuals were critical of MAVNI and favored its elimination. Former Army officer, Congressman Russell, expressed support for immigrant recruitment into the military but contended that MAVNI posed too many challenges, stating that, **"... The program is more of a problem than it's worth," (Texas Standard).** His stance suggests that while well-intentioned, the MAVNI program created obstacles that outweighed its benefits. Logistical and bureaucratic hurdles—such administrative complexity, resource constraints, and difficulties with vetting that became more extreme over time—diminished MAVNI's effectiveness and operational value. This sentiment echoes the program's growing inefficacy,

rendering it unsustainable for integrating talented and diverse recruits into the military ranks and the threads of American society.

In the context of MAVNI, **NBC** outlines the continual revision of naturalization criteria through military service, reflecting an ongoing shift in eligibility requirements:

> **To apply for naturalization, recruits are required to submit a document confirming their military service along with their naturalization application. Prior to the policy change, one day of service was sufficient to be eligible. But under the new policy, applicants will need to complete all necessary background and security checks, complete basic training, and serve 180 consecutive days in active duty or one year in the selected reserve among other requirements before their service can be considered honorable.**

The N-426 form, Request for Certification of Military or Naval Service, serves as proof of military service, irrespective of how early a recruit may be in the enlistment process. However, form completion can be challenging to navigate independently due to the complexities of gathering accurate documentation, avoiding blank fields, and ensuring all the provided information is correct. The details and contents of the form frequently prompt individuals to seek legal assistance to prevent processing errors and minimize the likelihood of rejection or requests for revisions. Therefore, delays are often inevitable, as obtaining necessary signatures and verifications from commanding officers and certifying officials takes time. Moreover, under the previous policy, recruits could become eligible for naturalization after just one day of service—which significantly enhanced the military's appeal to MAVNIs. Adopting an "out with the old, in with the new" approach, the current policy introduces multiple hoops that recruits must jump through before their service can be recognized as honorable. A legal prerequisite for entering the naturalization pathway involves meeting and fulfilling these updated conditions.

The military's approach to MAVNI is anything but consistent. Cynthia Smith, an Army spokeswoman, emphasized this point by stating that **"... any enlistee entering the military undergoes security screenings. Each recruit undergoes an individualized suitability review and the length of time for the review is dependent upon each individual's unique background" (Military Times).** A one-size-fits-all strategy simply does not apply to MAVNI recruits. The terminology suggests that foreign-born recruits are evaluated based on personal history, including, but not limited to, criminal records, educational background, mental health evaluations, and any other information deemed pertinent. This does raise questions about the criteria utilized in these assessments. The mention of **"individualized suitability"** and **"unique background"** indicates that the evaluation process is inherently subjective—leaving the door open for variability in how standards are applied and inconsistency in determining who is suitable or unsuitable for service. Since knowing who makes the final calls is crucial for pinpointing biases, the absence of a specified authority or organizational structure creates confusion about oversight of the MAVNI program.

The **NYT** sets the context that, although MAVNI recruits may not initially qualify for high-security roles due to their temporary status, they still undergo rigorous scrutiny and are "... **put through all the background checks required for top-secret clearance, including a review of years of finances and travel and several lengthy interviews."** The positions available to foreign-born recruits are generally viewed as support roles. Their lower-level assignments reflect the federal executive department's doubt about their reliability. MAVNIs go through a **"vetting from hell,"** only to find out that they cannot advance in the promotion system without citizenship **(NY Post.Com)**. Their career trajectories are altered, preventing recruits

from attending specialized schools or being afforded the same leadership opportunities that are available to native-born soldiers.

The thorough assessments create a feeling among MAVNIs as if they are under constant surveillance. These evaluations often consist of physical exams to screen for underlying health issues, psychoanalysis to determine mental fitness, and in-depth background investigations that probe everything from social media activity to political affiliation. As Pavel Astashkin, a Russian immigrant and airline pilot who has undergone numerous federal security checks, put it, **"I've been through so many screenings, they know me better than I know myself" (NYT).** The depth of gathered information reveals even the most personal aspects of a recruit's life. Mr. Astashkin highlights concerns about privacy and the intrusive nature of the extensive evaluations—a sentiment shared by many who pursue the military route. Over time, this level of scrutiny can significantly impact one's sense of identity, making recruits feel more like subjects of suspicion than future citizens. Mr. Astashkin, who once proudly embraced both his cultural heritage and American ambitions, began to question whether he truly belonged, feeling alienated by the very institution he hoped to serve.

The United States military has a longstanding history of identifying and recruiting skilled individuals with connections to other countries, recognizing that these **"ties"** offer invaluable linguistic, cultural, and strategic advantages. With lines of how recruits are perceived increasingly blurred, MAVNIs outlined that their value to the military seemed lost, **"... the Army recruits us for our foreign ties, then refuses to use us because of them … the security threats the Army thought it saw in the recruits were often ordinary aspects of immigrant life, like sending money or regularly telephoning relatives overseas" (NYT).** Although soldiers from diverse backgrounds enhance operational readiness, the MAVNI recruitment

strategy presents a contradiction. Despite bringing unique perspectives to various branches of the armed forces, there is an underlying lack of trust that comes with foreign association.

Rushed consideration of legislative changes within congressional reports accentuate the desire to remove foreign-born recruits perceived as threats to societal stability and national security as a whole. Reflecting this mindset, Representative Bill McCollum stressed a sense of urgency, **"The sooner we get them out of the country, the better procedures we have for that, the less likely we are to have that element in this country either create the actual acts of terrorism or directing them in some manner. We need to kick these people out of the country" (Report 12).** His remarks not only conflate non-citizen criminal offenses with radicalization, but also convey a clear implication that the presence of foreign-born recruits is an immediate risk. Furthermore, emphasis on terrorism and the idea that MAVNI program participants might be orchestrating such acts reinforces the stereotypes linking immigrants to extremism and violence. McCollum's perspective, which calls for the removal of MAVNIs rather than their integration, reveals a reactive security approach that prioritizes preemptive action to safeguard the American public. Such a stance signals a tendency toward control and a rapid response to perceived dangers, while simultaneously perpetuating generalization that overlooks the vast majority of foreign-born individuals who make positive contributions to the United States.

Even though **"The 'good moral character' requirement for naturalization has existed since Congress passed the first Naturalization Act on March 26, 1790" (Report 12),** no amount of background checks seem to eliminate the suspicion surrounding foreign-born military hopefuls. Within the historical context, the 1970 Naturalization Act mandated that recruits demonstrate a certain level of moral integrity. However, the terminology used in this context is

not precisely outlined or clearly defined in law, resulting in various interpretations. Therefore, the treatment of MAVNI program participants is dependent on immigration officials using subjective and highly discretionary criteria. While USCIS provides guidelines, the inherent ambiguity permits personal judgement to guide the decision-making process. This subjectivity means that evaluations vary widely; some immigration officers may adopt a holistic view, granting the benefit of the doubt to MAVNI participants, while others narrowly concentrate on the negative aspects of a recruits' profile. For instance, in some cultures, extended family networks, communal living, and reliance on kinship may be common (Zhao et al., 2020). However, in the United States, such arrangements might raise concerns about ties to potential security threats or perceived loyalty conflicts (Hafez, 2015). Moreover, in some societies, openly discussing personal matters or displaying emotion may be viewed as a sign of vulnerability, while in the U.S. it might be interpreted as a lack of psychosocial stability (Mesquita & Walker, 2003). Taking into account the evolving nature of the requirement and shifts in societal attitudes, the behaviors of foreign-born individuals and the social conditions they encounter must be reassessed in light of the current political climate. Data has shown that cultural practices such as the concept of collective responsibility can be misconstrued during the vetting process (Banulescu-Bogdan, 2022; Figueroa, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2020; Hall et al., 2019). A recruit's background can affect perceptions, as what is considered common and acceptable in one's home country may be viewed adversely in the United States. Also, MAVNIs from lower socioeconomic statuses are faced with different life experiences, and the weight of minor offenses arising from a disadvantaged environment varies accordingly (Sharpless, 2015). What one immigration official deems as insufficient grounds for denial of a favorable determination, another might view it as a disqualifying factor that bars the recruit from advancing in the security

review process. Additionally, during times of increased uncertainty, it is not unusual for officials to take on more restrictive vetting practices. This fluidity underscores how the military citizenship pipeline can be influenced by external factors and broader discussions regarding race and class. In today's highly politicized landscape, **"morality"** acts as a powerful tool—not only dictating, but also regulating who is perceived as worthy or unworthy of belonging in American society.

In her *Immigration and Nationality Law Review* Keynote Address, Margaret Stock elucidates that the timeline for obtaining citizenship is not as straightforward as outlined to MAVNIs in the initial stages of recruitment. Instead, it is laden with impediments that deter and disqualify program participants. Stock makes the reality of the convoluted system explicitly clear, explaining, "**... you wait a long time and you get your citizenship. That's the 'path' … it takes about 5 to 15 years, if you can get on the path. Most people can't get on the path. Really, legal immigration is much more complicated, and there are many 'stop signs' along the path telling you that you don't qualify" (Report 8).** For many MAVNI recruits legal pathways seem inaccessible from the very beginning. Both news articles and congressional reports acknowledge that immigration laws are riddled with complex documentation requirements that lead to confusion over what constitutes recruit eligibility. Enlistment barriers extend beyond procedural equivocation. The leeway given to immigration officials in interpreting regulations results in inconsistent rule application. The lack of access to resources and assistance yields a different outcome for MAVNI applicants based on the case officer's judgement; creating roadblocks at every turn they take on their path to citizenship, assuming they can even begin that journey. These extensive legal hurdles, as Dragomir (2023) argues, are not simply bureaucratic inefficiencies, but are indicative of how the U.S. military, as an "arm of

empire," manages foreign-born inclusion through classed surveillance. By constructing MAVNIs as inherently suspect and forcing them to navigate disproportionate scrutiny, the system reinforces racialized and conditional forms of belonging—where loyalty must be repeatedly proven rather than presumed.

Retention and Long Term Impact

I characterize *Retention and Long Term Impact* as the strategic use of immigrants' exceptionalism to address recruitment challenges. The literature indicates that the previous theme has a spillover effect—Chishti and colleagues (2019) discuss how heightened security screenings introduced unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles, resulting in recruitment stagnation. Similarly, a 2018 report from the American Immigration Lawyer Association (AILA): *Deconstructing the Invisible Wall*, outlines factors that have forced recruits-in-waiting to give up on the hope of achieving naturalization through military service. The data reflect a theme of enhanced retention among MAVNI recruits. As emphasized by Spoehr (2019), the looming crisis stemming from a significant portion of young Americans being unfit to serve mirrors the 218 coded references. The frequent mentions of this theme in the data underline how the combination of policy reversals and administrative retraction discourage future enlistment altogether. Further reinforcing this point, Stock (2009), a nationally known expert on immigration law and key architect of MAVNI, argues that for the fortunate program participants who successfully navigate additional layers of review, uncertainty and inability to achieve permanent status persist beyond the completion of basic training.

The military initiative offering a pathway to citizenship not only combated personnel shortages, but also incentivized skilled applicants vital in the realms of foreign engagements and

humanitarian relief: **"The Pentagon says 10,000 people were initially recruited as part of the [MAVNI] program, designed to bring in talented and specialized recruits who could not only provide essential expertise in foreign campaigns, but also help fill gaps at a time when the US military is struggling to meet recruiting goals (CNN).** It clearly demonstrates that the MAVNI program's primary objective was about fulfilling recruitment quotas. This approach sheds light on short term goals of the Department of Defense, where the influx of foreign-born recruits is leveraged to address pressing demands rather than considering the long-term integration of these individuals. Consequently, MAVNI exhibits a transactional relationship between the military and its recruits-in-waiting, emphasizing the necessity of meeting quantitative benchmarks.

According to a released review of the MAVNI program by the RAND Corporation, **"In general, the immigrant recruits have been more cost-effective, outperforming their fellow soldiers in the areas of attrition, performance, education and promotions …" (PBS).** Not only do MAVNI program participants excel in their military occupational specialty, they bring significant value to the Department of Defense. Relative to the resources invested, MAVNI recruits provide impressive performance outputs—essentially delivering strong results without imposing disproportionately high expenditures. In a country that prioritizes maximizing returns on investments, in this case being the recruitment of skilled foreign-born individuals, the U.S. government aims to capitalize on their potential. Irrespective of their branch or component, MAVNI applicants are also more likely to stay in the service longer, contributing to stability and reducing costs associated with recruiting and training new soldiers. Politico emphasizes that **"Regional expertise, language proficiency and cultural competence are now recognized as core military needs. And there are plenty of other reasons we make perfectly good soldiers,**

despite our "espionage potential," in the words of Defense Secretary James Mattis. Recruits who start out as non-citizens stay in the military longer than those who start out as citizens, research shows. Why would America want to turn us away?" The program helps ensure and maintain a more experienced force due to lower attrition rates among foreign-born recruits compared to their native counterparts. In addition to outperforming their peers, MAVNIs' educational qualifications indicate a strong capacity for grasping and retaining complex military strategy and tactics. In addressing the evolving and dynamic global threats, soldiers recruited through the MAVNI program are uniquely equipped and prepared to operate in every corner of the world. The integration of multi-ethnic personnel enhances combat capability, improves interoperability, and facilitates smoother transitions into ethnically diverse environments where future military operations are likely to occur (Copenhaver, 2014). Mission success relies on recruits' skills in navigating different cultures, effectively communicating with the local populace, and fostering diplomacy—which directly counter Mattis's reference to the common stereotype of spying and non-citizen untrustworthiness. The rhetorical question at the end of the quote challenges policymakers and prompts them to reconsider the restrictions that exclude talented and dedicated recruits from serving in the military.

In one powerful account, a Special Forces team preparing for a mission in Africa was in need of a soldier who spoke the local language. Through the MAVNI program, they located a service member who not only spoke the language but was originally from the very village they were assigned to. Clad in the uniform of the United States military, upon return to his hometown, his presence immediately gained the villagers' trust and respect. His deep understanding of the local culture and relationships turned the mission into what the Special Forces community later called the most successful operation. Stories like this, featured in the *Immigration and*

Nationality Law Review, exemplify the unique capabilities MAVNI recruits bring to the table and are the **"… kind of folks that the United States military needs to recruit today in order to contribute to our national security. Keeping folks like this out of our country does not make us safer" (Report 8).** Program participants embody the warrior ethos and live by the soldier's creed; volunteering for every opportunity, thriving in top-tier contests, and frequently earning promotions, which highlight their worth as valued team members and showcase the respect they command within the ranks. A standout example is Sergeant Saral Shrestha, who was born in Nepal and gained U.S. citizenship through the MAVNI program. He went on to win the Army's "Best Warrior" competition and **"'... was honored later that year at the annual Association of the U.S. Army's convention as the 'Soldier of the Year' (Military.Com).** Reflecting on his journey from a visa holder to a U.S. soldier, he described MAVNI as a **"blessing"** that paved the way for his success. When the program operates as intended, it lives up to the motto **"... mission first, soldiers always" (Military.Com).** Shrestha's story emphasizes that people are the military's greatest asset—with its strength rooted in diversity and the recruitment of high caliber individuals rather than sheer numbers. At the core of this effort, is a fundamental special operations truth, recognizing that **"…humans are more important than hardware and that quality is more important than quantity (Report 3).**

Even though it may not be widely publicized, **"Now two-thirds of all Army Reserve dentists are program recruits, according to NPR, which points to a quiet reliance on a pipeline of trained medical professionals with one big incentive to sign up that U.S.-born recruits do not need: citizenship (Washington Post).** This reliance on MAVNIs signifies a strategic adaptation to fill critical roles that may otherwise remain vacant due to dire shortages of such individuals in the medical field. The discrete nature of the MAVNI program underscores the

demand for a specific pool of qualified professionals. The emphasis on citizenship serves as an incentive to attract talented and motivated foreign-born recruits, while it lacks the same appeal for natural-born citizens, who inherently possess that right and have never had to contend with the fear of losing their status.

The Pentagon's review of the MAVNI program confirmed that non-U.S. born recruits tend to remain in the military longer, and as noted by **Washington Post**, **" … would save the military recruiting funds down the road. And linguists who stay in uniform would blunt the costs of finding third-party translators … When you lose a linguist, you end up buying them back at a higher rate through a contractor …"** A steady retention rate helps alleviate the costs of advertising, onboarding, and training expenses involved in the recruitment process. Minimizing the frequency of new recruitment cycles offers considerable financial advantages for the military, enabling the Department of Defense to reallocate resources and benefits to other critical areas. Furthermore, both the mission-critical and monetary values of skilled MAVNIs become apparent in their absence, as the government must pay a premium to bring in contracted external support. Additionally, in the current job market, **"Recruitment of U.S. citizens with critical skills is particularly difficult and expensive when competing with the private sector … If you're going to avoid skills shortfalls, it might mean siphoning resources from other accounts" (Washington Post).** The armed forces struggle to attract U.S. citizens, especially when vying against private companies, as military sign-on bonuses often fall short compared to the compensation packages offered by the private sectors. The latter part of the quote suggests that the difficulty in enticing potential enlistees implies that, without successful recruitment efforts, the military is compelled to rely on initiatives like MAVNI to outsource qualified personnel and fulfill operational demands.

MAVNI recruits were given a wide array of assurances, yet there is a profound sense of disappointment and frustration regarding the government's commitment, **"The military made a promise to us, and they should deliver on it. I shouldn't have to read the news as soon as I wake up every day to try to figure out if Congress is any closer to making a deal so that the government—my government—can deliver on that promise" (Politico).** MAVNI program participants share a common aspiration of building a better life. However, when confronted with persistent barriers, their motivations begin to wane. The future of MAVNIs rests with Congress, and although recruits cannot participate in the political process through voting, they are profoundly impacted by its outcomes. What once was enthusiasm quickly turned to disillusionment as their envisioned pathway to citizenship becomes seemingly out of reach. Ongoing political gridlock and lack of accountability impact retention rates within the military. Instead of receiving clear and timely guidance, MAVNIs are left in the dark about the support they can expect. This bureaucratic inaction postpones the provision of essential services, such as benefits and protections available to citizens. As a result, MAVNI applicants fall out of status and are compelled to seek asylum rather than continuing their efforts to serve their host country.

These unmet promises are not occurring in a vacuum—and the uncertainty faced by MAVNI recruits reflects a larger, ongoing debate about the role of foreign-born individuals in the U.S. military. While many program participants view their service as a path to belonging and citizenship, political leaders have questioned whether that path should exist at all. Some members of Congress have voiced strong opposition to the MAVNI program itself, casting doubt on its legitimacy and long-term viability. This skepticism contributes to the precariousness recruits experience, as their futures are shaped by political forces beyond their control. For example, Andy Harris, a Republican Congressman from Maryland, advocates for limiting

MAVNI, **"Our military must prioritize enlisting American citizens, and restore the MAVNI program to its specialized, limited scope" (PBS).** Since the program was established by executive order instead of being authorized by Congress, Harris voices his concerns about its legitimacy and scope. He places an emphasis on prioritizing the recruitment of natural-born citizens first and foremost, which is troubling as it implies that these specific individuals are the sole backbone of the United States military. Harris is also a strong proponent of restricting the MAVNI program to its original, narrow intent—arguing that it should not serve as a broad and open avenue for non-citizens to join the military. His opposition to immigration-related initiatives and endorsement of tightly controlled regulations reveal skepticism towards allowing MAVNI program participants to serve and pursue citizenship altogether.

Following 9/11, a particularly restrictive mindset took hold, **"... let's keep everybody out of the United States, because that's the way to secure our borders. That was not correct. In fact, the best way to secure our national borders is to think more holistically and think about national security not just as a matter of keeping people out of the United States, but letting the right people in" (Report 8).** Circulated attitudes and fear-driven policies reinforce the assumption that all foreign-born entrants pose a security risk— largely contributing to blanket exclusions based on fear or nationality rather than recognizing and embracing global talent. Many critics of MAVNI are quick to jump to conclusions, failing to recognize how the program serves the interest of meeting military needs. Therefore, according to **NPR,** discharging immigrant recruits in large numbers **"… comes at a time when the Army needs more soldiers. And the booming economy is making it hard to find those willing to sign up. This year the Army said it needs 76,000 recruits to fill its ranks. That's 16,000 more than last year."** This results in a paradox where the Army is experiencing a loss of qualified personnel at the very time

they are needed most. The situation is similarly felt across all branches of the United States military, as they also experience the same effects. The rationale for increased recruitment goals and escalating pressure to bolster ranks is in direct response to the ever-changing global conditions: however, **"… adding to the challenge, some 70 percent of young people don't qualify for military service because of criminal convictions or failure to meet the education or physical requirements. So the Army is being forced to give waivers to recruits, for such things as minor drug charges or physical problems, to boost enlistment" (NPR).** The statistic explicitly outlines that a significant portion of the population is not eligible, limiting the pool of potential recruits. Native-born individuals may not qualify for military service, yet the Army's decision to offer waivers for infractions demonstrates the lengths to which the Department of Defense is willing to go—ultimately lowering and compromising military readiness standards by permitting unqualified personnel to slip through the cracks. **Report 5** offers a nuanced perspective on the current state of recruitment, highlighting challenges in attracting **"... capable technical talent, either new graduates or experienced people. All is not well, even though the overall picture looks pretty good right now. There are some significant challenges that DOD and its industrial partners face."** Despite the appearance of a healthy recruitment landscape at first glance, the issue of quality versus quantity emerges beneath the positive facade. While critics may claim that the numbers are favorable, they cannot guarantee that the right individuals are selected for the job. This extends beyond merely filling positions as securing and retaining the necessary talent pool affects readiness and future operational outcomes.

NYT highlights precarious circumstances encountered by recruits like Mr. Gavrish, **"[who] was now working a second job on weekends, saving money for a lawyer to apply for**

political asylum. Many of the recruits now in limbo may be discharged and deported before the challenges now in federal court can be decided (NYT). Caught in a state of uncertainty, MAVNI program participants take proactive measures to secure their futures amid government instability. Recruits feel compelled to seek legal remedies through alternative means. Their anxiety surrounding the news that they could be discharged and deported before their cases are resolved in court pushes them to pursue "backdoor access"—such as applying for asylum, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), or other immigration relief options not originally intended for military personnel. This sense of urgency to attain a more stable status and secure their place in the United States pressures foreign-born individuals to consider any available option for self-preservation.

Yet despite these structural barriers and the emotional toll they carry, MAVNI program participants continue to demonstrate remarkable dedication to service. In fact, data consistently shows that foreign-born recruits perform as well as, if not better than, their native-born counterparts:

> **Immigrants were more likely to show up for basic training and less likely to quit basic training than American citizens who started basic training. Immigrants were more likely to re-enlist in the military after serving their first tour of duty. They were less likely to get in trouble, less likely to get court martialed, and more likely to make the military a career. A CNA report from November 2011 said that immigrants are far less likely than citizen recruits to attrite, which is military language for 'quit the military' (Report 8).**

Higher attendance and retention rates indicate that foreign-born recruits seek opportunity and more importantly, stability. The lower likelihood of leaving the service before completing their obligation, along with their tendency to re-enlist after their initial contract, suggests that MAVNIs view military service as an honorable route to citizenship. The benefits associated with

military service, often taken for granted by native-born individuals, are key factors that solidify long-term commitment for MAVNI program participants and make a military career particularly appealing. Moreover, **"... it would be a loss for the Army to bar these recruits" (Washington Post)** because MAVNIs face fewer disciplinary actions, as they strive to prove themselves as worthy and valuable members of American society. This encourages a reevaluation of narratives surrounding skilled immigrant recruits and their roles in areas as critical as national defense.

Foreign-born recruits are not only being assigned to roles, but are placed in areas where their skills are in demand. MAVNI program participants **"... not only filled necessary billets but performed higher on entrance tests than native-born troops (Military.Com).** Outperforming native-born counterparts indicates that MAVNIs possess strong educational backgrounds or relevant expertise that enable them to excel in aptitude evaluations, physical fitness, and assessments of military knowledge. The men and women of MAVNI **"... often mirror exactly the 'high quality' youth the Department seeks for enlistment'" (Report 6).** Immigrant recruits exhibit desirable traits and qualifications that make them highly sought-after candidates. Their superior performance reflects diverse skill sets that MAVNIs bring to the United States military. Their contributions are not only valuable, but exceptional, **"We don't see this normally; the quality for this population is off the charts" (Politico).** Many have advanced degrees or specialized training—which positions them as competitive advantages and vital assets.

Report 12 reveals that **"... military recruiters sometimes mislead many foreign- born soldiers to believe that enlistment automatically entitles them to citizenship … Interestingly, according to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the federal government often fails to provide adequate resources and assistance necessary to complete**

and file citizenship paperwork." The purported claims frequently made by recruiters create unrealistic expectations for MAVNIs and immigrant recruits alike, who are under the impression that joining the military will automatically grant them citizenship—which is not the case. In reality, while military service can facilitate naturalization, it does not guarantee citizenship upon enlistment. The mendacious statements are only exacerbated by the Army's recruiting goals, with recruiters being assessed on whether they can meet their targets. Failing to achieve the established quota can lead to poor evaluations, reassignment, or shatter all hopes of career advancement. To complicate matters further, the federal government does not provide sufficient support for effective navigation of the citizenship process, resulting in unclear procedures that could have been avoided.

According to Stock, **"... the MAVNI program was based on the ideas she presented at a brainstorming conference for the army due to the huge recruitment crisis and concluding that it is faulty to assume that an immigrant is more likely to be a terrorist than a native-born American (Report 9).** MAVNI was an innovative response to the U.S. military's recruitment challenges. Stock championed this proactive initiative and even as the program faced its collapse, she continued to advocate for MAVNI participants. While MAVNI emerged from a recognition of the immense value that skilled immigrants bring, not everyone was invested in its success. MAVNI encountered pushback from the start, with initial assumptions fueled by opposition to the program implying that foreign-born recruits were inherently more likely to engage in criminal behavior, radicalism, and terrorism. The dual portrayal of immigrants as both threats and invaluable mechanisms that drive national defense reduces them to cogs in the machine—replaceable components and interchangeable parts within the executive branch.

Report 8 outlines that the U.S. military has been grappling with a personnel shortage, especially in the early twenty-first century, **"... when the economy had not yet crashed and the economy was booming, not many Americans were signing up for the military. There were wars going on, headlines about people getting killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Army was trying to desperately fill its ranks, and it was coming up short."** This is in reference to the fall of 2007, which highlights a period when civilian careers seemed far more appealing than military service. Between the televised coverage of conflicts in the Middle East and the sharp contrast of a thriving economy, these visible dynamics factored into the enlistment downturn. Although many were deterred from joining, an even larger number was ineligible, with only **"'... 3 out of 10 American citizens of military age [being able to] pass the military enlistment standards to get into the military. Of the 17- to 24-year-old youth population, many were medically disqualified, 'morally disqualified,' overweight, had too many dependents, or required a 'medical moral waiver.' After all of this disqualification, only 3 of 10 people were fully qualified. Today, it is closer to 2 out of 10" (Report 8).** The data indicates a gap between the qualifications of potential recruits and the Department of Defense's recruitment needs—with fewer than 30% of military-age native-born Americans meeting enlistment requirements. Moreover, factors such as education, public health, and delinquency contribute to the decline in eligibility. Medical disqualifications point to rising obesity rates, while moral disqualifications imply criminal involvement that precludes individuals from serving. The mention of waivers demonstrates that even those who express interest may not necessarily meet the standards of the Army profession. Therefore, the growing reliance on recruitment flexibility has second and third order effects, negatively impacting both military readiness and long-term sustainability. A grim picture of the current situation is painted with

eligibility now dropping to just 20%. It is also noteworthy that these concepts seamlessly tie into Adrian Matias Bacong and Cecilia Menjívar's (2021) "immigrant health paradox,"—showing that immigrants often exhibit better overall well-being outcomes than their native-born counterparts with similar socioeconomic profiles. However, this trend diminishes over time, indicating that the racialization of legal status, enforcement practices, and systemic disadvantages align with explanations for adverse immigrant trajectories the longer they remain in a host country. Therefore, as the pool of qualified native-born personnel shrinks, the U.S. military's ability to maintain its status as the world's most dominant force comes into question.

There has always been the notion that **"... America is a nation of immigrants, but the reality is actually quite different. We have this famous poem on the base of the Statue of Liberty, saying 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.' This is our national myth … [The reality] is that we don't want people who are tired and poor and huddled and yearning to breathe free. (Report 8).** America's self-image as welcoming, stemming from the idealized concept of inclusivity referenced by the famous Emma Lazarus quote, does not reflect the actual approach to immigration today. While the U.S. has historically presented itself as a refuge for the oppressed and persecuted, the current national security landscape tells a different story. Federal policies as evidenced by restrictive immigration laws and stringent vetting processes, have invariably prioritized wealth and skills over integration of the destitute. Modern immigration criteria excludes the very people the **"national myth"** claims to receive with open arms. Rather than embracing the desperate and displaced, the U.S. tends to favor those who meet its shifting demands at any given moment—illuminating the departure from the ideals inscribed on the national monument and justifying how foundational rhetoric has become disconnected from practice.

Margaret Stock **"... often had the unpleasant task of explaining to eager, patriotic, and energetic young people that they were barred from enlisting because of their lack of legal status. I also talked to many military members who were trying to get promising young people to enlist. They would approach me, and I would have to give them the same bad news. And over and over again I would hear the comment, "Ma'am, this makes no sense. All they want to do is serve the United States. Why don't we let them?" (Report 7).** Foreign-born recruits wanting to serve find themselves hindered by circumstances beyond their control. There is a dissonance between their willingness to join the U.S. military and the bureaucratic stumbling blocks that prevent them from enlisting. MAVNI program participants **"wish for nothing more than to contribute to the country they call home" (Report 7),** yet they are legally barred from doing so. Their enthusiasm is often met with disappointment and frustration, as the DoD's demand for highly qualified recruits is contradicted by barriers that preclude talented individuals from joining the ranks. Turning away motivated candidates makes systemic rigidity more glaring, and MAVNI exclusion is not only counterproductive amid the ongoing **"national dilemma" (Report 1),** but also a missed opportunity that undermines military readiness. As a nation that prides itself on meritocracy, foreign-born recruits ready to take up arms and risk their lives should be recognized and rewarded, not dismissed. After all, as emphasized in **Report 5, "At the end of the day, we need the best minds and we need the best ideas."** Yet as Dragomir (2023) spells out, this selective exclusion is not accidental—revealing how the U.S. military constructs immigrant devotion as contingent and provisional. By allowing some to serve while systematically barring others, the state bolsters a stratified system where race, class, and national origin are silent actors determining whose allegiance is considered credible, and whose is perpetually deferred (Dragomir, 2023). Immigrant

exceptionalism serves as a tool to address military recruitment oversights without committing to full inclusion. Often pairing this with burdensome security checks and opaque background clearances, suggests that citizenship is attainable but only for a select few. The conditional pathway to naturalization sustains the illusion of opportunity just enough to compel continued service, while exploiting foreign-born labor without completely integrating it. Held out like a reward, the promise of citizenship keeps MAVNI program participants invested, even as the military structure remains exclusionary by design.

Stringent/Inadequate Vetting

I describe *Stringent and Inadequate Vetting* as heightened requirements combined with insufficient resources and personnel to effectively carry out the screening process. Scholarly literature accentuates that thorough examination of MAVNIs reflects broader systemic issues of political control and preferential inclusion. Amaya's (2007) work aligns with enhanced security protocols disproportionately burdening program participants—subjecting foreign-born recruits to excessive scrutiny while simultaneously failing to provide sufficient capabilities to process clearances effectively. Antohi (2021) and Barros (2020) bring the understaffed and underfunded vetting apparatus to the forefront—signaling institutional reluctance to fully integrate MAVNIs. Aptekar (2015) situates the obstacles of indefinite enlistment delays, cancelled contracts, and widespread disqualifications within historical patterns of racialized hierarchies of belonging and bureaucratic roadblocks that have long hindered immigrant naturalization. Bigo (2002) conceptualizes such practices as "governmentality of unease." Wherein the executive branch amplifies immigration-related fears to justify restrictive policies. Connections are made between modern vetting mechanisms and a series of federal laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act

(Calavita, 2000) and the McCarran-Walter Act (Bennett, 1966). Major legislation habitually cited national security concerns as a pretext for procedural inefficiency. Therefore, this deliberate exclusionary approach, both past and present, underscores the precarious status of foreign-born recruits and accounts for the 197 coded instances of this theme.

From the very beginning, MAVNI faced challenges and experienced initial instability, **"It was suspended shortly after it got off the ground in 2009, following a shooting rampage at Fort Hood, Texas. Before authorities discovered that U.S.-born Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan was behind the massacre, officials feared the risk of a foreign-born insider threat within the ranks. That eventually led to more stringent security checks when the program was reinstated in 2012" (NPR).** Despite being unfounded in relation to MAVNI, the program's rocky start, coupled with the deadly incident, fueled unwarranted fears about foreign-born service members. Since the perpetrator was not a MAVNI program participant but had a name that is commonly associated with Muslim heritage, the decision to impose additional vetting procedures on MAVNI recruits was misguided. If security screenings for foreign-born recruits were intensified in response to an attack by a U.S. born individual, then shouldn't the same measures be uniformly applied to everyone undergoing the enlistment process? This rhetorical question makes inconsistency in security policies evident. Foreign-born recruits are subjected to stricter scrutiny, even when the actual threat originates from within the native-born population pool. Following the program's reinstatement, MAVNI participants were unfairly targeted—serving as a clear example of policymakers overcorrecting in a way that solely and disproportionately impacts foreign-born recruits. **Report 5** circles back to the **"barriers created through overregulation,"** revealing how excessive and unnecessary restrictions place undue strain on the vetting process.

The initial halt of MAVNI was partly driven by internal concerns and entirely prompted by a lone act of terrorism, where **"... Nidal Malik Hasan attacked some people and killed them at Ft. Hood, Texas. You might know that Nidal Malik Hasan was born in the United States, so he was a native born American citizen, but one of President Obama's appointees apparently didn't understand that and halted the recruiting of immigrants as a result of the native-born U.S. citizen killing soldiers at Ft. Hood, Texas" (Report 8).** The mass shooting perpetrated by an Army psychiatrist triggered a series of program suspensions—a criticized rationale since Hasan was not a foreign-born recruit. The most troubling aspect of the statement is the misinterpretation of the incident and the administration's reactive approach to decision-making. The attack was hastily associated with an insider threat among immigrant service members by prioritizing an immediate response over a well-founded assessment of the tragedy. While additional security measures were introduced to detect and mitigate potential red flags, particularly regarding radicalization, the process became excessively restrictive, burdensome, and **"extraordinarily difficult" (Report 8).** Escalating the issue, proponents of MAVNI condemned **"'... incompetent bureaucrats' in the Pentagon of destroying a formidable talent pool and taking advantage of an anti-immigrant climate to create an impossibly high bar for foreign recruits to join the Army and put themselves on a path to citizenship'" (CNN).** This exemplifies how foreign-born recruits get caught in administrative crossfire—and are left debilitated by the American nativist contagion. As a result, reviving the MAVNI program and expanding quotas while simultaneously limiting access through overly stringent vetting procedures appears contradictory.

After the program's turbulent launch, **"... officials heightened security screenings specifically for MAVNI recruits, diverting 'already constrained Army fiscal and manpower**

resources,' the memo said. The overtasked vetting process and heightened security risk led officials to recommend canceling enlistment contracts for all 1,800 awaiting orders for basic training, and halting the program altogether (Washington Post). This was not a hasty decision—it was methodical and deliberate, incorporating recommendations from high-ranking officials regarding the fate of recruits-in-waiting. The referenced memo, intended for sharing policy updates and procedural changes, suggests that written communication was limited to a select group on a "need-to-know basis," not only keeping recruits in the dark, but making them the last to be informed. After investing years into the process and believing their enlistment contracts were binding, the sudden cancellation left recruits in a legal limbo. This represents a significant breach of trust—causing a stark contrast between the demands placed on MAVNIs and the military's minimal effort to facilitate a streamlined enlistment process to be evinced. The Army, like any large institution, operates within budget and personnel constraints. Therefore, whether it is the unequal distribution of resources, staffing shortages, or political pressures — MAVNI program participants have been treated as scapegoats. Given existing strains, redirecting capabilities to MAVNI vetting was deemed unsustainable and placed low on the Department of Defense's list of priorities.

The issue extends beyond logistical concerns, with misalignment between vetting and recruitment being the primary point of contention. Ideally, security screening should be fully completed prior to entering the military pipeline. In a standard enlistment scenario, a recruit signs a contract, completes basic combat training, and is assigned to a designated unit. However, for MAVNI program participants, the clearance process often lagged behind, **"Until we can get them screened, we can't bring in more. "You've got to be able to screen them as they come in, rather than get them in and then you send them off to a unit and they say, 'By the way,**

they don't have security clearance yet.' And then they say, 'Well, thanks very much, but I can't use them.' "So it's simply a matter of aligning the process, the recruiting process with the usual screening process" (Military.Com). This underscores a layered frustration, where commanders have operational requirements and expect their assigned personnel to be mission-ready. With MAVNI recruits lacking security clearances, the only option is to sideline them, resulting in inefficiencies and degraded military preparedness. Despite possessing highly sought-after skill sets, MAVNI program participants are underutilized due to administrative reasons. When MAVNIs are unable to perform their specialized roles, overall unit effectiveness and deployability suffer. Moreover, the quote denotes the idea that people are being "shipped in" to serve. When in reality, foreign-born recruits are already present in the United States for specific reasons, holding temporary statuses that come with student or work visas. This resembles the early twentieth century assembly-line model—just as industrial workers were reduced to interchangeable parts in mass production systems, MAVNIs are similarly treated as mere numbers rather than individuals. Foreign-born recruits are seen as commodities, fulfilling the military's needs, while their own agency, dignity, and autonomy are largely overlooked.

Supporters of MAVNI **"... argue that the recruits are being illegally targeted for separation and that the current vetting process is designed in such a way that all but ensures disqualification" (Task and Purpose).** Proponents of the program express that foreign-born recruits are unfairly singled out, with the screening process devised to block their path to citizenship regardless of their qualifications or suitability for military service. The system is riddled with uncertainty that weeds out MAVNI program participants who are stained by the bureaucratic hurdles, excessive scrutiny, and administrative delays. Even for individuals on the verge of citizenship acquisition, have had the opportunity revoked, as noted by the **New York**

Times, "... who were at the doorstep of citizenship have had the door slammed shut at the last minute." MAVNI recruits face an opaque process where the only guarantee is the enforcement of **"prosecution priorities" (Report 7).** As the result of an unrealistic vetting criteria, even highly qualified candidates struggle to pass. The calculated imposition of insurmountable roadblocks and overwhelming obstacles makes rejection of foreign-born recruits compulsory, or at the very least, inevitable. An additional problem with the **"extreme vetting policy is that it appears to be pretextual"** rather than a legitimate security measure. **Report 9** underscores that national defense and public safety are being used as a facade to justify the large-scale exclusion of MAVNI program participants.

Seven MAVNI recruits who filed a lawsuit argued that the **"... Defense Department was improperly stalling them, the investigation covers at least 10 years of finances, education and professional activities, on top of credit and criminal background checks. The individual must complete an exhaustive questionnaire and is interviewed by an investigator, often for several hours. Close relatives, references, employers, neighbors and colleagues are also interviewed (NYT).** As prolonged vetting tactics appeared aimed at discouraging participation in the MAVNI program, the deliberate delays placed many recruits in precarious immigration situations. Rather than processing MAVNIs within a reasonable timeframe, the invasive nature of the background investigations cast doubt on whether the screenings were a legitimate and necessary security precaution or an additional layer to administrative barriers. As a result, countless recruits-in-waiting faced visa expirations and the risk of deportation, leaving them in immigration limbo. It underscores inconsistencies in the treatment of MAVNI program participants compared to other enlistees—further complicated by abruptly canceled contracts and the initiation of removal proceedings. Some were forced to

abandon their pursuit of citizenship through military service altogether and had no choice but to apply for protected status. The lawsuit alludes to an ethical dimension and the weaponization of the security clearance process, pushing foreign-born recruits into legal uncertainty and obstructing their integration into American society.

Margaret Stock continued to criticize the handling of MAVNI, **"They ordered so many background checks that they destroyed the program … The background vetting that the Department of Defense has ordered on these people is much, much stricter than any vetting that is done… for a U.S. citizen getting a job at the White House" (10TV.Com).** The bureaucratic overload not only created logistical nightmares, but also subjected MAVNI recruits to security screenings far more intense than those required for top government positions. White House employment, which spans various departments—to include staff, aides, advisors, counsel, and assistants—generally requires background checks, criminal history reviews, financial disclosures, and, in some cases, polygraph tests. Similarly, agencies like the FBI, DEA, CIA and NSA require rigorous vetting, but their processes follow a predictable and structured timeline. In contrast, MAVNIs underwent counterintelligence investigations and endured redundancy. Unlike the streamlined framework utilized for government and intelligence roles, MAVNI recruits faced multiple rounds of thorough examination that took years to complete. The comparison between U.S. citizens applying for jobs at the White House or within three-letter agencies and MAVNI program participants, exposes inconsistencies and misplaced priorities in vetting standards. Therefore, the initial successes of the MAVNI program were marred by later challenges. Originally designed with good intentions, the program evolved into a complex issue that demanded intervention and eventually, discontinuation. With no formal replacement introduced, efforts were only concentrated on preserving the military's reputation.

Even after thoroughly combing through employment history, financial records, and personal associations, the Pentagon claims that there is insufficient data available on MAVNI recruits: **“MAVNI recruits require intense scrutiny, the Pentagon said, because of a lack of information about them ‘due to the fact that, as a group, they have spent significant periods of their lives outside of the United States and have had extensive contacts with foreign persons’” (Marshall Project).** The argument suggests that living outside of the continental United States makes individuals unreachable, significantly complicating the Department of Defense’s ability to track and investigate them. However, this assumption is unfounded, as many foreign-born recruits are already exposed to work or student visa screening. As underscored in **Report 8**, the United States government, in close collaboration with Customs and Border Protection (CBP), collects, processes, and stores **“... biometric information on [MAVNIs], and they were probably well-behaved because they were maintaining legal status, and in order to maintain a legal, non-immigrant status, you can't have a serious criminal record.** Moreover, the rationale is flawed, considering that U.S. citizens—such as diplomats, military dependents, and expatriates—live abroad for extended periods without being subjected to the same granular level of scrutiny. While U.S. citizens frequently maintain foreign contacts, work for multinational corporations, or pursue international studies, they are not automatically viewed as security risks in the way that MAVNI counterparts are—a clear double standard. Driven by concerns that they might have connections to foreign intelligence agencies or ties to extremist organizations, MAVNI recruit background is reinforced as inherently synonymous with suspicion.

Not only did they quietly carry out the dismissals, but by remaining silent, the Department of Defense avoided providing any explanation, **“... they say they can't tell you**

anything and then they do things that don't make any sense like discharging a whole pile of people all at once and not telling them why they are discharging them. " (NY Post.Com). The government's claims that the details are classified or cannot be disclosed reflect the frequent use of national security as justification for withholding information. This left MAVNI recruits without answers—preventing them from the ability to challenge or even fully grasp the reasoning behind their discharges. To make matters worse, those affected are unable to appeal effectively, as secrecy serves as a shield protecting the DoD from accountability. Moreover, instead of conducting individualized assessments—much like the extensive security screenings that initially stalled MAVNI recruits—the Pentagon opted for discharging program participants en masse rather than addressing each case individually this time around. This approach highlights the lack of transparency, deliberate opacity, and irrational decision-making. Therefore, incompetence is masked by disqualification, and large-scale mismanagement has led to a systemic problem due to the DoD's own inefficiency and ineptitude.

As Army spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Nina Hill explains **"Department of Defense and Army policy require recruits to undergo a suitability review as part of the military accessions process … [where] one aspect of the suitability review is a security screening. Any recruit, to include those recruited through the MAVNI program, who receives an unfavorable security screening is deemed unsuitable for military service and is administratively discharged." (CNN).** This ties into the first theme, *security checks and background clearances*, accentuating the complex nature of the military naturalization pathway. In both instances, a critical question arises: *Who is making the final determination of a foreign-born recruit's suitability for service?* It seems that in MAVNI cases in particular, an unfavorable decision is the default outcome—mainly when time constraints and insufficient

resources impede comprehensive background investigations. Delays in screening have led to preemptive cancellation of enlistment contracts and separation from military service altogether, denying MAVNI recruits the opportunity for due process. Consequently, highly skilled and potentially valuable individuals are dismissed before their cases receive fair evaluation. The government's preference of expediency exacerbates the sentiment among MAVNIs that they are discardable. The rigid language and lack of individual consideration shed light on the treatment of program participants as entries in a system—swiftly processed and removed. Their introduction to military service not only being short lived, but extremely contingent on an impersonal and deeply flawed process.

The Department of Defense was reprimanded, specifically with the Army being, **"... called on the carpet in court for doing arbitrary and irrational security screenings, and so it started looking for a new way to kick these guys out. Allegations of illegal conduct could be used as grounds for discharge, even if formal charges are never filed" (NYT).** Being held accountable in this context stems from a vetting process that lacks a clear, logical, and consistent foundation. Instead of adhering to a standardized criteria, background investigations for MAVNI program participants were often unevenly applied and heavily reliant on subjective judgement. After facing legal challenges over screening procedures, the Army sought alternative ways to separate recruits from the service. Beyond issues of DoD discretion, what stands out is that mere accusations, without concrete evidence, proven misconduct, or court rulings, justified MAVNI contract termination. Unverified claims were utilized as grounds for dismissal, meaning that the Army could initiate removal proceedings even if MAVNI recruits were never formally charged or convicted of a crime. This biased reliance on unproven allegations and administrative

convenience denies foreign-born recruits-in-waiting the opportunity to defend themselves in any legal setting.

Taken together, the inconsistent handling of *Security Checks and Background Clearances*, uncertainty of *Retention and Long Term Impact*, and excessively *Stringent and Inadequate Vetting* patterns illustrate a deeper systemic issue within the military's relationship with foreign-born recruits. Over time, MAVNI's ambiguity, selective enforcement, and unchecked administrative power exposed how program participants were treated as indispensable and disposable. This subtle trend echoes a broader imperial logic where state capitalizes on the labor and linguistic ability of foreign-born recruits while denying them full rights or protection (Dragomir, 2023). Much like historical examples of empires exploiting colonized subjects, the U.S. military similarly instrumentalized MAVNI program participants (Dragomir, 2023; Fogarty, 2008; Ginio, 2013).

Discussion

The number of immigrants who naturalized through military service surged dramatically, rising from just 836 individuals in 2000 to over 9,100 in 2010—an astounding 991% increase (Buenavista, 2012). While military service has provided a more accessible and overall possible path to citizenship during hostilities, it is by no means a guaranteed outcome (Buenavista, 2012). The immigrant-citizen transition remains fraught with challenges, and despite the increased opportunities, many service members still face significant bureaucratic hurdles and delays, preventing them from fully securing the citizenship they were led to believe would accompany their service (Buenavista, 2012; Stock, 2009). This highlights the gap between the experienced reality of foreign-born individuals and the promise of citizenship through military service. What

this shows is that instead of genuine incorporation, recruitment tactics, such as those used to entice MAVNI program participants, exploit immigrants' vulnerabilities, turning them into disposable labor for national security interests.

Wong and Bonaguro (2020) found that the majority of Americans support allowing legal immigrants to serve in the military, recognizing their contribution as valuable to national defense. However, there is significant opposition to the participation of MAVNI recruits—with many viewing foreign-born program participants as unfit for military service despite their willingness to serve (Wong & Bonaguro, 2020). This divide highlights ongoing debates about immigration status, national security, and the rights and opportunities afforded to different groups within the immigrant population. Rather than a broad-based call for immigrant enlistment, MAVNI was designed for the purpose of strategic utility, focusing on skills that addressed capability gaps—which explains the exclusion of certain languages, to include Spanish. The United States prioritizes languages like Arabic, Pashto, Russian, and Mandarin for geopolitical interest. They are indispensable to military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and potential future engagements with China, whereas there is already sufficient access to native and heritage Spanish-speaking personnel. Especially following 9/11, the United States military faced new demands for intelligence collection and intervention in the Middle East and South Asia, resulting in Latin American regions to be considered lower-priority zones for U.S. military involvement (Barzegar, 2010),

There are also numerous historical examples where, despite their service, African American soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War and Japanese immigrants who served in World War I were not granted citizenship. Their sacrifices were undeniable, yet race remained, and continues to be, a dominant factor in determining who is afforded full rights and recognition

in the United States (Wong & Bonaguro, 2020). Even though these soldiers demonstrated extraordinary loyalty and commitment, their backgrounds prevented them from receiving the citizenship and equal treatment they deserved. This underscores the historical and ongoing influence of racial discrimination, where the contributions of minority groups, no matter how compelling, were often overshadowed by deeply ingrained prejudices (Wong & Bonaguro, 2020).

In her 2012 work, Tracy Buenavista argues that American institutions have been structured and restructured to uphold white supremacy, often under the guise of neutrality, objectivity, and meritocracy. These ideals, while presented as fair and impartial, serve to conceal the deep-seated racial inequalities embedded within the system (Ngai, 2014). Additionally, despite the military being promoted as an all-volunteer force, recruitment practices have historically and disproportionately targeted communities of color (Buenavista, 2012). This targeted recruitment reflects broader systemic issues, where marginalized groups are both overrepresented in service roles and yet still face barriers due to perpetual foreignness (Buenavista, 2012; Ngai, 2014). The authorization of MAVNI signaled a shift from a model of assimilation to a transactional approach. Past initiatives framed military service as a way to "Americanize" foreign-born recruits (Hahner, 2017; Lauret, 2016). The concept of "hyphenated Americans"—representing a duality that connects one's ethnic roots to their host country's identity, as seen in terms like Mexican-American, Chinese-American, or Italian-American—was historically frowned upon (Lauret, 2016). Immigrants were expected to fully conform to the sociocultural norms of the United States. However, MAVNI paradoxically redefined recruits as both potential security threats and valuable assets, rather than as future citizens with a vested interest in American society (Lauret, 2016).

By intensifying the processes used to verify the background and suitability of foreign-born recruits, the DoD projected an implicit distrust of those it sought to enlist. The heightened surveillance not only delayed enlistments, but also created a bureaucratic entanglement that left recruits in legal limbo. This reinforced a narrative that MAVNIs were liabilities to be scrutinized—further eroding trust in the military's commitment to honoring its promises to immigrants, leading to administrative chaos, confusion, and disillusionment. Although MAVNI placed an emphasis on linguistic capabilities and specialized skills, it ultimately reduced foreign-born talent to sheer utility, sidelining broader civic aspirations and long-term integration into American society. Instead of fostering a clear and stable pathway to military service and citizenship, the United States government tokenized MAVNIs. A superficial effort was made to show interest in foreign-born recruits for their expertise, creating an illusion of diversity, rather than confronting underlying issues of exclusion.

This research, when situated within the frameworks of *Social Contract Theory, Critical Race Theory*, and *Militarized Citizenship*, exposes the military's paradoxical stance toward foreign-born recruits. *Social Contract Theory* presumes that immigrants exchange loyalty and service for protection and recognition. Yet, MAVNI sheds light on a broken contract—program participants fulfill their obligations through service, but are not consistently granted the rights they were promised. *Critical Race Theory* aids in uncovering how racial hierarchies and national belonging are policed through selective inclusion, rendering recruits of color both necessary and suspect. *Militarized Citizenship*, driven by the idea that full civic membership must be earned through sacrifice, further complicates the position of MAVNIs. Rather than being viewed as full participants, recruits from non-European backgrounds are granted provisional access on the basis of utility, not humanity (Cacho, 2012). This brings the military's deep ambivalence to the

forefront—simultaneously relying on and distrusting these individuals. For this to dissipate, it will require a fundamental shift in how the Department of Defense conceptualizes race, loyalty, and belonging—it will not simply disappear with better policies or more streamlined administrative procedures. So long as the military determines foreign-born value for what they provide rather than who they are, it will continue to reproduce this cycle of exploitation. By drawing connections between MAVNIs contradictions and the larger landscape of minority recruitment, this work contributes to military studies by showing that even well-intentioned programs can reinscribe inequality when motivated by utility rather than genuine incorporation. Until then, the legacy of MAVNI will continue to reflect the unresolved tension between the equitable treatment of those who serve and national security interests.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research on MAVNI faced several limitations. First, involving the lack of comprehensive public data and restricted access to critical information on recruitment trends and success rates. Additionally, frequent policy changes and instability—including multiple suspensions and reinstatements—not only make it challenging to conduct longitudinal studies, but also assess the program's long-term effectiveness. The selective nature of MAVNI and its limited scope of recruits further constrained research, as the relatively small size of program participants may not provide sufficient output for large-scale statistical analysis. Furthermore, there is a notable absence of follow-up studies tracking MAVNI recruits' career progression, integration into civilian life, or overall post-service citizenship experiences—which leave a significant gap in understanding the program's lasting footprint on military citizenship and immigration services.

MAVNI serves as a powerful framework that laid bare the complex intersection of immigration, military service, and national security. It is consequential for researchers to explore how the recruitment of foreign-born individuals shapes diplomatic relations with their home countries; shedding light on the program's broader geopolitical impact. Given the current political landscape and U.S. involvement in global conflicts, ongoing research is essential to assess whether upcoming recruitment efforts will shift toward increased waivers or alternative pathways for non-citizen enlistment. If so, what does that mean for the standards of military recruits? It is worth considering the relaxation of policies—will lowering the expectations for service members or maintaining exacting criteria be necessary to balance security concerns with operational effectiveness? Additionally, the failure of the MAVNI program threatens the sustainability of military recruitment blueprints. Therefore, examining the successes and shortcomings of MAVNI can offer vital lessons on fulfilling promises made to immigrants in exchange for invaluable contributions to national defense. With a new presidential administration, the accessibility of the already scarce MAVNI-related data may be impacted. By prioritizing strict immigration control, this shift in leadership could make it significantly harder to evaluate the program's full scope. Conversely, an approach that strengthens military readiness and international alliances can revive, reintroduce, and reform strategic partnerships. Studying MAVNI offers researchers new opportunities to analyze recruitment trends and retention rates amid times of crisis—its legacy shaping contemporary debates about who is allowed to serve, under what conditions, and whether foreign-born recruits are truly valued as Americans.

This research contributes to the literature on military sociology by centering on a marginalized population—foreign-born and predominantly non-white program participants—shedding light on their unrecognized role in sustaining the all-volunteer force. It not only

questions the strategic utility of such skilled individuals, but also the moral obligations owed to them. By documenting both the exclusions and opportunities embedded in MAVNI, this work expands the conversations around minority recruitment, citizenship, and the evolving definition of national service. An even broader cultural shift is influencing recruitment efforts. Military service no longer carries the same symbolic weight as it once did; with skepticism about ongoing conflicts, concerns over work-life balance, and a growing emphasis on personal autonomy casting doubt on its viability as an honorable career path (Report 6). Compared to past generations, when military service was closely tied to patriotism, devotion, and sense of duty, today's polarized views on foreign policy and societal attitudes towards global involvement have made enlistment unappealing (Bacevich, 1997; Collins, 1998). As a result, reduced visibility and diminished interaction with recruiters, whether in school settings or at recruiting offices, has led to limited exposure to the military as a whole. Consequently, if the downward trend in interest persists, the all-volunteer force model may need to be reassessed. Future policy adjustments and considerations could entail stronger incentives, expanded eligibility criteria—similar to what MAVNI aimed to achieve—or explore alternative solutions to sustain recruitment levels.

Further analysis on public perceptions and foreign policies can determine whether restrictions on foreign-born recruits in specific military occupational specialties are justified or products of entrenched nativist sentiment. Beyond the uniform and military service, a deeper examination of these recruits' contributions to the civilian workforce can provide valuable insights into their long-term, societal integration. Moving forward, a crucial area of focus should be the experiences of immigrant women in the military. The unique barriers encountered by female non-citizen recruits within the armed forces deserve a closer look. This even smaller and often overlooked subset, can offer a more nuanced perspective on military service as a distinct

pathway to citizenship. Understanding these dynamics is essential for advancing inclusivity and driving progressive, reform-minded policies. As **Report 11** emphasizes, the enduring role of foreign-born recruits in the United States military is **"… not merely benign as a matter of natural security—they are vital for preserving it."**

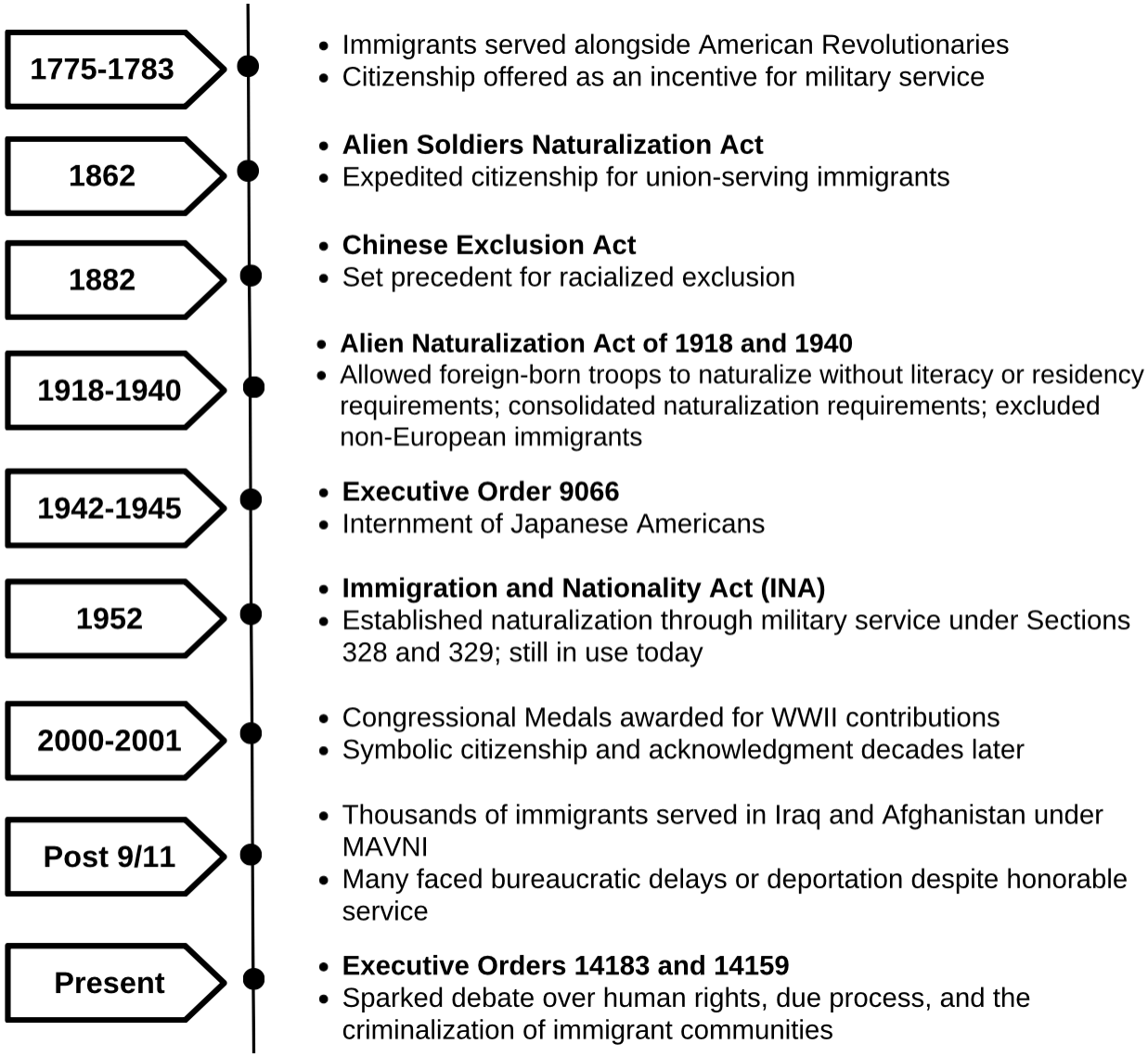
Appendix A

Current list of most sought-after languages allowed by the MAVNI Program

Albanian (AB)
Amharic (AC)
Arabic Algerian (DH)
Arabic Modern Standard (AD)
Arabic Iraqi (DG)
Arabic Egyptian (AE)
Arabic Jordanian (AK)
Arabic Levantine (AP)
Arabic Libyan (AL)
Arabic Maghrebi (AM)
Arabic Syrian (AP)
Arabic Palestinian (AP)
Arabic Lebanese (AP)
Arabic Sudanese (AV)
Arabic Moroccan (BS)
Arabic Tunisian (BW)
Arabic Yemeni (AU)
Azerbaijani (AX)
Bengali (BN)
Burmese (BY)
Cambodian-Khmer (CA)
Cebuano (VB)
Chinese Cantonese (CC)
Chinese Mandarin (CM)
Czech (CX)
French (FR)
Georgian (GG)
Haitian-Creole (HC)
Hausa (HS)
Hindi (HJ)
Igbo (JB)
Indonesian (JN)
Korean (KP)
Kurdish-Kurmanje (XK)
Kurdish-Sorani (XS)
Lao (LC)
Malay (ML)
Malayalam (MN)
Moro (MH)
Nepalese (NE)
Pashto-Afghan (PV)
Persian Dari (PG)
Persian Farsi (PF)
Portuguese Brazilian (PQ)
Portuguese European (PT)
Punjabi (PJ)
Russian (RU)
Serbo-Croatian (SC)
Sindhi (SD)
Sinhalese (SJ)
Somali (SM)
Swahili (SW)
Tagalog (TA)
Tadjik (TB)
Tamil (TC)
Thai (TH)
Turkish (TU)
Turkmen (UB)
Urdu (UR)
Uzbek (UX)
Yoruba (YQ)

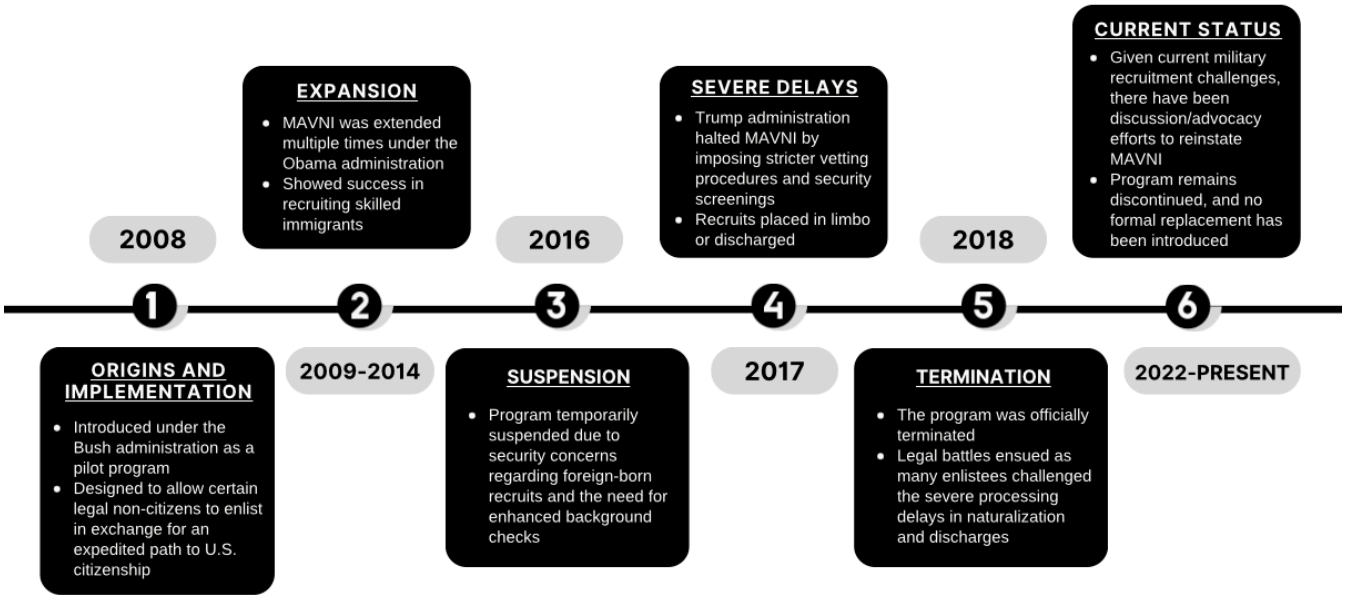
Appendix B

Legislative Timeline



Appendix C

MAVNI Timeline Infographic



Appendix D

The expedited naturalization process for military members under both INA 328 and 329 is structured as follows (*INA 328 and 329) | USCIS*, 2023):

- Must be 18 years or older
- Complete *Form N-400, Application for Naturalization*
- Submit *Form N-426, Request for Certification of Military or Naval Service*
- Demonstrate good moral character
- Show the ability to read, write, and speak English, along with knowledge of U.S. history and government
- Demonstrate attachment to the principles of the U.S. Constitution
- Military members are exempt from the naturalization application fee

To be eligible under INA 328 an applicant must:

- Have served honorably in the U.S. armed forces for a cumulative period of at least one year
- Be able to prove they were never separated under conditions other than honorable
- Be a lawful permanent resident
- Fulfill specific residence and physical presence requirements

INA 329 specifically requires that an applicant must:

- Have served or be currently serving honorably during a designated period of hostilities, and if separated, it must have been under honorable conditions
- Have been on board a vessel owned or operated by the United States for noncommercial service

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