

I speak of the surprise many are showing over the sudden surge of folks wanting to become citizens. It seems just astonishing to many guilt-ridden Americans that flocks of legal aliens, many of whom have been living here happily under that sobriquet for decades, are suddenly rushing the generally lethargic offices of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

The Baltimore district headquarters of the INS reports 70 percent more applications from last October to February than in the previous year; in the Washington office, applications for citizenship are up 33 percent; and nationally, they are up 78 percent.

Now, this extremely positive development is many things — all good — but it is not at all surprising. The change is a direct result of California's vote last fall approving Proposition 187, which bars illegal immigrants from education and welfare services.

After that jolt to the nation's sloppy approach to immigration and to citizenship, legal aliens say repeatedly they felt they would be next on an angry country's increasing desire to sort out who belongs — and who doesn't. But they also say something else. They are quoted repeatedly as saying they have been realizing it is time to choose where they really belong.

This will be a shock, of course, to the new multiculturalists in our universities and schools or to those guilty Americans who can find nothing good in America. For the politically correct despise traditional American citizenship. They have been actively working to devolve America's traditional citizenship — which our country's Founders looked upon as a voluntary and individual "sacred compact" between man and the state — into forms of special-interest citizenship, in which self-interested groups will barter with the state for "rights." The multiculturalists, of course, would speak for the groups.

They will also be unhappy to find it is possible to reverse trends such as the one of people living in America not choosing to become citizens. (Twenty years ago, two-thirds of aliens naturalized; until the surge of naturalization this winter, the figure had gone down to one-third.)

Here is where, I believe, we find the core of this turnaround over citizenship. For we are seeing a direct result (the citizenship surge) of a clear act of will (Proposition 187) by the voters. This shows that America can change; that even rather simple acts of our body politic can quickly produce incentives for major social change and bring out the best in people, not

Suddenly a surge to citizenship

only the worst.

Many readers will say here, "But everybody knows that!" I'm afraid not. It seems to me that the "liberal agenda" (I hate to call it liberal) that has dictated social policy to this country since the '60s has done two unforgivable things: (1) it divorced morality from the nation's civic life, and (2) it instilled in Americans the fear that "nothing can be done" about our problems — from teen pregnancies, to our inner

cities, to illegal immigration.

Anyone who questions that need only read Daniel Patrick Moynihan's brilliant article, "Defining Deviancy Down." The senator shows irrefutably how American society in the last three decades has constantly accepted ever-worse levels of criminality and

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deviancy because it lacks the will to address problems. Finally, deviancy itself gets ever more "defined down." And, since we accept ever more awful behavior as the norm, the country sinks deeper into the mud.

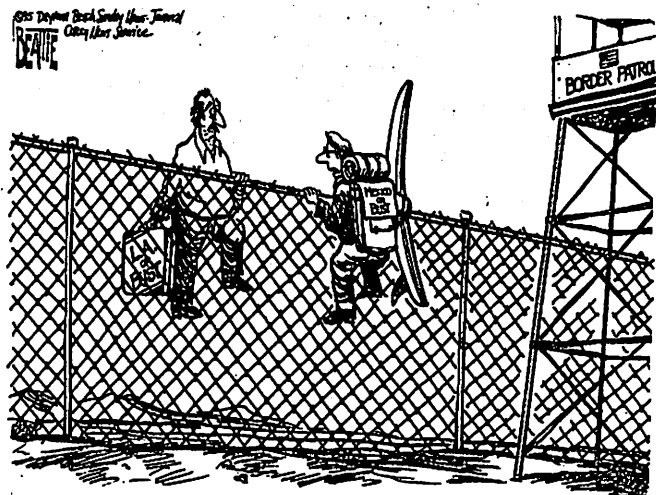
The rapid reversal on citizenship, it seems to me, should reassure us that, with appropriate energy and will, the Republican Congress most probably can address our present problems. It also shows us — since we seem to have forgotten this old lesson — that negative incentives and authoritative measures can indeed work to bring about the kind of behavior you want.

The problem here was that the multiculturalists and the guilt-ridden Americans offered no incentives to create or deter behavior. Their approach was to accept every change in human behavior as given, unchangeable and undisciplinable. They are quite simply wrong.

There are members of the present generation of problems who are doubtless unsavable; they will have to be written off, a true "lost generation." But if we put into place now new disciplines and expectations, yes, America can and will change.

And, oh yes, to you new fellow citizens, "Welcome!"

Georgie Anne Geyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.



"Rain ... floods ... fires ... mudslides ... earthquakes ... I've had it!"