

If I were to offer sage words of advice to any foreigner wanting to place himself or herself on the fertile soil of these United States, it would be to perhaps choose Canada or gear up for harsh treatment by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (or whatever it's been rebranded in these post-9/11 days).

Recalling a recent newspaper story of three young scholarly Pakistanis who arrived here, decided they really didn't want to use their visas to attend school and promptly disappeared into the American heartland, I wondered if maybe that wasn't the easiest way to deal with the INS and its bureaucrats. Just disappear.

If you're, say, a hard-working British subject who has lived in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave for more than three decades as a permanent resident, you just may begin to suspect that the INS considers you someone who may have visited the Taliban for tea or served as Fidel Castro's official jailer of political dissidents. You won't find much warmth.

This year my British wife's green card (it's more pinkish than green, actually) came up for renewal. All the forms and the cash (nearly \$300, which ain't chicken feed) were promptly dispatched to the INS, or Homeland Security, or the Department of Funny Walks, or whatever. After five months we decided something was amiss. Getting information from the 800 number designated to help in the process yielded nothing but a migraine. It was very frustrating. Eventually, I called Rep. Steny Hoyer's staff expert on all matters dealing with immigration.

The Hoyer aide, Betty Rogers, was very helpful, but she couldn't really get coherent answers from the immigration people either. Congressman Hoyer was incensed and told me he was going to make a call to someone lofty. Steny has pull. Ms. Rogers then said the green card renewal process was taking a year. A year? My wife's status is established, the green card is nothing more than proof that she's entitled to live here until the end of her days. So why a year? Background checks because of terrorism, I was told. Oh, give me a break. Thirty-five years at the same address and no criminal record and it's going to take INS a year to verify that? Even Rep. Hoyer was stunned.

The truth is that it doesn't matter that you've lived in the same place since what feels like the dawn of time. The INS bureaucrats want to play with you, and rather cruelly in my opinion. We're used to that, though. I recall the sometimes tacky treatment my wife and acquaintances from the U.K. received from the federal airport guardians of our gates. The nastiness is doled out in equally terrible doses to all, regardless of race, creed or hairstyle.

My wife and I once stood at an INS desk in Puerto Rico for what seemed like hours as an obnoxious uniformed official sneered and smirked and poked away at his computer. He wouldn't answer me when I asked, in my nicest tone, why we were being kept there for so long. Eventually he dismissed us with a diffident toss of his head and another sneer. What a creep, I thought, but bit my tongue fearing we could end up in the clink for unruly behavior. These officious, self-important twerps can do whatever they want, alas.

I vividly recall the pre-9/11 case of a British reporter married to a Yankee and the father of American-born kiddies whose British newspaper went down the tubes and left him temporarily unemployed after having worked here for years. His work permit was no longer valid, so he decided to get one of those aforementioned green cards and begin a freelance career. The INS treated him as if he had a communicable disease that would wipe out the entire population of the Free State. The agency knot heads subjected him to the most demeaning treatment imaginable, despite his American wife and children. He was grilled as if he had attempted a potshot at a government bigwig, as was his wife. Were they really man and wife, he was asked. Could they prove it? Was he not just a London sleazeball trying to sign up for American welfare? And so forth and so on ad nauseam. Perhaps if he were from Pakistan and said he wanted to study organic gardening at the University of Maryland he would have been granted his green card in a flash. Or, of course, he could have just disappeared and joined the millions of illegal aliens now wandering about in this country and making money.

One of the more annoying encounters we had with the eagle-eyed, but addle-brained, INS martinets took place when we drove across the Canadian border into Minnesota. We found ourselves in the odd situation of having to meander briefly back into the United States to access the road to our destination in Manitoba. Well, it must have been a slow day for the gung-ho border guards, or whatever they're called. I once crossed into Communist East Germany with less frustration than I encountered that unforgettable day.

The INS gendarmes went into mental overdrive - an obvious accomplishment - as we arrived at their obscure little outpost in the middle of nowhere, herding the three of us into their shack and asking us to empty the contents of our wallets and pockets onto the table. When I stepped outside to get my wife's passport from the car, I thought the INS functionary doing all the talking and acting like an oaf was going to shoot me. Our car was searched, we were asked idiotic questions and then gruffly sent on our way with not a word of explanation or apology for the inconvenience and surly treatment. Meanwhile, truckloads of mid-Western yahoos went zipping through the border. Very strange, I thought. The only contraband we had in our car was some smoked fish from Ontario, and that was going back to Canada. At the Canadian border we were courteously waved right through. Boy, I thought, this is one for the books: I was thrilled to leave

the United States and return to a foreign country! The East German militiamen were friendlier than the American customs and immigration people.

On another jaunt back from Canada, I innocently asked the INS person on duty at Toronto Airport what documents he wanted to see from my wife. "If she ain't got a green card, she ain't going nowhere," answered this dedicated promoter of Anglo-American relations in his best ungrammatical INS-speak. Geez, I thought, what a really sweet welcome to the U.S. of A. Maybe that encounter was dug up from the INS records and used to determine that my wife is an unsavory character and might be an ideologue with the Scottish Liberation Army, thus mandating a year-long wait for green card renewal.

Anyway, this tale has a happy ending. After Congressman Hoyer jumped into the fray we suddenly received an appointment in Wheaton to get pictures and thumbprints processed for the new card. While there, the old greenie was extended through February of 2007 "in case the new card doesn't arrive before then." Amazingly, two weeks to the day after our sojourn up the beltway and through the wilds of Wheaton the new card arrived in the mail! Wow, I thought, I had witnessed both the post office and the INS actually operating efficiently. I had to sit down and fan myself.

Nevertheless, I can not fathom why these government bureaucracies can't communicate with people and take the time to explain why there might be a delay in finishing a task that is of the utmost importance to the person involved. My poor wife had visions of being tossed out of the country. It isn't remotely fair.

I suspect Congressman Hoyer's intervention played a big role in getting the INS people into efficiency mode, and I thank him and his staff for that. However, I believe everyone in a similarly frustrating situation should receive the same treatment from the INS, but I know that's wishful thinking.