
An immigrant's story

A lot of immigrants change their names when they become U.S. citizens. I like my name, but it's really foreign-sounding. The spelling is confusing; the phonetics, challenging. So when I got my citizenship, I had everything planned out. I would change my name to James Bond!



**HAMID
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I IMMIGRATED to the United States when I was 12. My sisters came to the states a decade earlier for higher education. After the fall of the pro-Western Shah of Iran, they settled here and became citizens.

By the time I arrived, the process was much harder, but my sisters, patiently dealing with the Immigration and Naturalization Service on my behalf, never gave up. Nearly 13 years after my arrival, I received a call from one of my sisters that an interview had been scheduled. They asked me to dress well, comb my hair, cut off my disgusting rat tail (it was fashionable back then in West Virginia), and speak proper English, not slang.

I was excited. Before my

meeting with the INS, I discussed it with a few buddies.

They told me that a lot of immigrants change their names when they become citizens. Some recalled their own ancestry (Polish, Italian, Czech, Chinese) and how previous generations of parents or grandparents had changed their last names once they came to this country.

This opportunity was huge and meant so much to me. I like my name, but it has had its troubles; people hear it and assume things. It's really foreign-sounding. The spelling is confusing; the phonetics, challenging. Often I am called Habib, not Hamid.

So I had everything planned out. I would change my name

to something more promising: James Bond!

I was a big fan of the movies and the fictional character. I thought maybe the name would help my chances of socializing with the ever-elusive opposite sex.

The moment arrived. The INS agent was a middle-aged man with a gut, a long mustache and an impressively long rat tail. In an emotionless, bored tone, he asked: "Anything you want to change?"

With great enthusiasm I replied: "Yes! I want my name changed to Bond, James Bond." He paused, stared for a second, broke out into laughter and walked away mumbling, "I've heard it all."

I was escorted to another area where a dozen or so other newly naturalized immigrants were waiting for their citizenship certificate. About an hour later, a clean-shaved, boyish-looking man came to the window: "eeh...Ha...med uuh...Ta...Tavu..."

I hurried to the window. "Hi, I was Hamid Tavakoli. But there must be a mistake. I

am now James Bond."

He was perplexed. After an uncomfortable pause, he handed me my naturalization paperwork: "Here you go, dude." Then he called other names in his stack of manila envelopes. I knew this was supposed to be a life-altering moment. My sister kept saying how big a deal it is to be a U.S. citizen. "This is what we strived to achieve for so many years," she said. "Now life will be easier. You'll eventually get a U.S. passport. You'll be able to vote."

All I could think about was the immense opportunity I'd just lost. I share this story with you to remind you that our nation is a nation of immigrants. That's what makes it special. Yet, it's important to keep things legal. I waited for nearly 13 years for citizenship. I am not a fan of illegal immigration.

The process of permanent residency leading to citizenship should be an effective and fair process. If the INS is broken, let's fix it, but let's be choosy about who comes here. A lot of people want to come to

the United States. We should be selective, admitting those who are eager to work and give back to their new nation and providing a path toward citizenship.

We must not allow those with hateful, anti-American ideologies to enter. America is still the land of opportunity because people can come here, work hard and make it. A new wave of immigrants is arriving, more informed and better versed than most in the process of obtaining Social Security and welfare benefits. They need to hear, remember and agree to live by the words President John F. Kennedy spoke to his countrymen: "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

I've been an American citizen for decades, but I still am in awe of this nation, which invites every American to follow his dreams. I continue to dream of being James Bond. See you at Casino Royale.

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