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Trump on the Border: More of the Same



Photograph Source: US Border Patrol – Public Domain

Trump's critics call him a liar, immoral, authoritarian, someone who rejects American traditions. And he is all of these but the last, his border policy makes clear. His proposed measures are not innovative in their cruelty. They both echo established practice in the border zone, and reinforce trends ingrained in U.S. history.

This border policy, as spelled out this month, includes three features. The first is militarization. Trump has ordered "thousands of additional American troops to the southwest border over the next two months." The second is indefinite detention. Trump wants to "keep

thousands of [asylum seekers] in jail indefinitely while they wait for a resolution of their asylum requests.” The last prohibits refugees from setting foot in this country. Trump [resumed](#) “Remain in Mexico,” which “forces asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while their cases make their way through U.S. courts.” Throwing weapons at social problems, jailing innocents, shunning dark-skinned exiles. Nothing original here.

Consider just the border first. Militarization in that zone is longstanding. Presidents from [Reagan](#) to [Obama](#) backed Border Patrol staff surges, [equipped](#) agents with the sophisticated arms and technology one would expect a modern paramilitary force to exploit, and, beginning with Carter, [supported](#) wall-building along the Mexican boundary. Indefinite detention is also a border-area custom. The UN Committee Against Torture, in 2014, [decried](#) Washington’s use of a “system of mandatory detention to automatically hold asylum seekers and other immigrants on arrival in prison-like detention facilities, county jails and private prisons.” A decade earlier, the number of detained immigrants on any given day was [23,000](#), over four times [the 1994 figure of 5,532](#). Trump extends these legacies.

And in doing so he is deeply in sync with broader U.S. traditions. Consider the disdain, expressed through his policies, for dark-skinned refugees. Ever since its birth this country has deemed white people its true citizens. The Naturalization Act of 1790, for example, [cleared](#) a route to citizenship for “any Alien being a free white person.” Chinese were [banned outright](#) in 1882, and the Asiatic Barred Zone, in 1917, “[marked](#) out a vast area of Asia as the home of undesirables.” The latter era’s national origin quotas [had](#) “an unfounded anthropological theory” as their basis, a belief in a “mythical ancestral stock” whose pure descendants deserved to settle in the U.S.

These policies were rare when Washington launched its restrictive campaign in 1790. But other countries copied the American example until “every country in the Western Hemisphere [followed](#) the U.S. practice of discriminating against certain immigrants by race and ethnicity.” Later this influence ranged farther, to Nazi Germany, where attorneys codified the Nuremberg Laws on the American model. There were, however, limits to this inspiration. “Nazi lawyers, even radical ones, [found](#) American law on mongrelization”– the “[one-drop rule](#)”– “too harsh to be embraced by the Third Reich,” concluding that “American race law simply went too far for Germany to follow.”

Even after major overhauls in 1965 and 1986, “discriminatory aspects of the [American immigration] system [remained](#),” because policy updates “did not [address](#) the underlying structural problems” entrenched after centuries of racist practice. And Bill Clinton’s immigration law, from 1996, “essentially [invented](#) immigration enforcement as we know it

today,” with all its attendant horrors. Trump’s malice toward Latino asylum-seekers is in this grand tradition.

Consider next Trump’s wish to detain, for indefinite stretches, Central Americans seeking asylum. This policy will prolong and expand a core U.S. experience, showing again that Trump is in lockstep with his country’s customs. “On any given day, roughly 460,000 people occupy county and city jails despite not having been convicted of a crime,” and some “24 percent of the total incarcerated population at the state and local level” have not been found guilty of any offense. This problem is notably severe in rural counties, in part from arrests related to the opioid plague. It hardly warrants mention that the locked-up are mainly poor users, not the Sacklers, corporate distributors, pill-pushers playacting as doctors or government officials who all helped flood the country with painkillers.

And poor people suffer throughout the pretrial detention system. Among our sacred institutions, “jails have become massive warehouses primarily for those too poor to post even low bail or too sick for existing community resources to manage.” A revealing comparison is the median felony bail, \$11,700, to the \$400 expense 40% of Americans, in an emergency, would not be able to afford. Figures like these point to an old problem, not some new scandal. “Throughout much of our history, to be poor was a crime,” writes Stephen Pimpare, adding that the citizen’s “typical encounter with government has not been through welfare programs, but through the police and the prison.” Confining migrants awaiting asylum will not undermine this tradition.

Turn last to militarization, another defining U.S. trait. Ours is a country where “53 cents of every federal discretionary dollar goes to military spending,” creating a permanent war economy, a state of affairs critics across the spectrum call one of endless war. Iraqis like those gunned down in the video Chelsea Manning leaked to Julian Assange, Central Americans from the same nations now sending refugees are just some of the millions who’ve suffered our belligerence abroad. Within the U.S., militarism has flourished at the expense of social programs, birthed and nurtured the white power movement, and subjected citizens to battle-ready police squadrons, as “SWAT teams violently smash into private homes more than one hundred times per day.” This culture created Trump, not the other way around.

But too often, critics of the president presume U.S. history and institutions have some moral core, that Trump deviates from this decent norm, and that his removal from office will solve many problems. Shallow analyses, like laments on the rise of the Trumpocracy, like a fixation on Trump as our nation’s chief anti-democratic actor, assure satisfaction

with simple solutions. We cannot afford these illusions, given the problems to be confronted.
And so we should see Trump for the deeply American figure he is.

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