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## *The War on Terror Turns Inward*



Image by Victoria Pickering.

President Donald Trump has made no secret of his disdain for immigrants, particularly the non-white variety from south of our border. His statements that immigrants are “poisoning the blood” of our country,” coupled with Fox News reports on Hispanic-appearing migrants who commit crimes, leave little doubt about what he and his allies think of (non-white) immigrants and their contributions to this country.

So it didn’t surprise me that he recently began to follow through on his own and his Department of Homeland Security (DHS) leadership’s earlier intentions (as far back as 2018) to detain immigrants — including unaccompanied children — at military posts. Earlier this month, the first deportation flight carried a few men from the American mainland to our naval base and Global War on Terror offshore prison site in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Trump’s spokesperson Karoline Leavitt referred to those migrants as “the worst criminal illegal aliens” and “the worst of the worst.” The flight apparently included members of a gang from Venezuela. Yet troops had already been ordered to ready the base in Cuba to house some 30,000 immigrants — a dramatic increase in its capacity — in military tent encampments meant to supplement existing detention facilities there.

The move is part of President Trump’s signature public policy initiative: to deport millions of immigrants living in the U.S. without clear legal status. Some 40% of those Trump deems “illegal” and has targeted for deportation actually have some sort of official permission to be here, whether because they already have temporary protected status, a scheduled date in immigration court, or refugee or asylum status.

Since none of them wear their immigration status on their shirts (thankfully!), it might prove unnerving indeed how officers from DHS will be selecting people for interrogation and detention. (It’s probably not the guy in front of you at Starbucks with a Scandinavian accent who just ordered a fancy drink.)

Everything from Ku Klux Klan flyers left in towns across the Midwest after the election to Trump’s order removing the protected status of schools, healthcare facilities, and places of worship when it comes to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids paints a dire picture. We haven’t seen profiling on this scale since the days after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, when the federal government ordered tens of thousands of men of Arab, Middle Eastern, and South Asian descent to register and be fingerprinted, subjecting them to increased surveillance and vigilante violence.

Since then, globally, the U.S. has detained hundreds of thousands of men (and, in some cases, boys) domestically and at that infamous prison in Guantánamo Bay, many without the ability to challenge their detentions and without the Red Cross surveillance that international law grants them.

Given the way legal standards for the treatment of people detained at federal facilities have eroded over the last two and a half decades, what may happen to tens of thousands of migrants at incarceration centers like Guantánamo in the years to come can only be a matter of grim speculation. However, one thing is clear: whatever the treatment of the “worst of the worst” at or near that infamous prison, now a recyclable holder for whoever is the enemy of the day, it will be hidden from public view.

### **My Backyard**

Such developments seem ever more real to me because my family lives about 40 miles from downtown Washington, D.C., where the Trump administration is churning out executive

orders at breakneck speed. We live in a beautiful rural community in a county where about one-third of all residents are foreign-born. Those immigrant families bring cultural and linguistic richness to our schools, fuel the day-to-day operations of our many nearby military posts, run some of the most affordable supermarkets and tastiest restaurants around, and do the physically and emotionally demanding work of growing our local food. It's hard for me to imagine how such immigrants are the worst of the worst.

Sure, some of them — like some of any other population you choose, including, of course, that convicted felon Donald Trump and crew — commit crimes. Yet rates of criminal activity among immigrants are much lower than among U.S. citizens. According to a 2020 study by the Bureau of Economic Research, immigrants are 60% less likely to be incarcerated than people born in this country.

I'm also a military spouse of more than 10 years and, in my family and community, it's taken for granted that you're going to be spending a lot of time with people who were born elsewhere, since immigrants of various stripes make up about 5% of our service members and are a significant part of military spouse communities as well. And believe me, many of the folks I know in those foreign-born subcategories of military communities are truly scared right now, even if for wealthier white families like mine, the suburbs and rural rolling hills around our nation's capital offer opportunities to learn and a peacefulness that make them great places to raise kids.

### **A Changing Landscape**

That said, in the wake of President Trump's recent orders, the landscape around me is already changing. Some children whose family members are immigrants or who themselves are foreign-born have been absent from local schools. One of my children came home upset earlier this week and has been complaining of an unsettled stomach since learning that a good friend will have to leave the country due to fear of harassment under Trump's new policies. Nearby, a Maryland high school teacher has been placed on leave after boasting on social media that he would help ICE identify "illegals" among his students. School administrators are bracing for armed federal agents to show up, demanding access to kids.

This is the kind of mundane horror and sadness I see blooming around me these days, as the news starts to report similar developments elsewhere: the Syracuse restaurant workers who were called into an ICE office and left with ankle monitors; the Guatemalan-American father of four in Ohio who was told by an ICE agent during his annual check-in that he needs to book a flight back to the country he only remembers from his teenage years or be deported. And these are the "lucky" ones who at least have some forewarning. Others won't and will

simply be subjected to the whims of federal immigration agents like those in New York City, where a memo issued by Mayor Eric Adams informed city workers that they can allow ICE agents into municipal facilities if they “reasonably feel threatened or fear for your safety or the safety of others around you.”

At least, the Trump administration’s immigration policies and actions are still subject to criticism by plucky journalists and activists prepared to call out instances of abuse of executive power, racial profiling, and violations of the right to education and other human rights. Count on this, though: the Trump administration isn’t planning to give the public the opportunity to critique the mistreatment of migrants deported to Guantánamo or any other military post or new detention center in an up-close-and-personal fashion. Such areas will be closed to all but servicemembers and assigned workers.

Sometimes even military family members won’t have the special authorization to enter them. In order to get in, you’ll need to present an official I.D., have a reason to enter, possibly have a military service member directly authorize your access, and abide by specific restrictions on movement and rules about whether you can photograph anything on the base. At that base in Guantánamo, restrictions are even tighter and there are no guarantees that journalists will ever have access to migrants and their living conditions there.

### **Isolation as Death**

President Trump has undoubtedly chosen the U.S. military base at Guantánamo, Cuba, not just because it has so much detention space or, in past times, was used to detain Haitian and other immigrants, but at least in part because the prison there that held so many tortured prisoners from this country’s war on terror is well known to rights groups and the general public as a nightmarish facility. A 2014 Senate report, along with numerous investigations by human rights groups, found that terror suspects, including in some cases boys, at that base had often been denied due process, detained indefinitely without charge, and subjected to inhumane or degrading treatment.

It’s a fact that people do poorly living in conditions of isolation from the rest of society. Our own military is a case in point. In the decades since fewer of us began to serve, thanks to the absence of a draft (even as the military budget ballooned), Americans generally know far less about what our military is like and what it does. In these same years, suicide rates among servicemembers and veterans have surpassed civilian rates, while violent crime and accidents have grown more common following post-9/11 deployments. Such problems are due, at least in part, to a culture of silence and isolation among military families, as well as a

lack of access to military bases by journalists and the public. What we can't know about or see, we naturally care so much less about.

Other examples of isolated populations, ranging from those in nursing homes during the Covid-19 pandemic (where there were staggering death rates) to closed mental institutions, remind us that isolation begets a lack of public accountability, indifference, and greater human pain.

Of course, the federal government has also had a deadly history of isolating people for national security reasons — from Indian reservations to the internment of Japanese- and German-Americans on military installations during World War II. Things have never ended well for such groups.

### **The Sound of Silence**

As our country's next wave of abuse toward supposedly dangerous "others" begins, it's possible to pay attention. Yet when I go out into my community and speak with neighbors, other parents, friends, and acquaintances, I'm reminded of how easy it is to do nothing in the face of what's happening around us. When I urge people to write their representatives about the treatment of immigrants, they all too often look away and don't respond, or say they're afraid of violent retribution if they post a yard sign on their lawns about how "everyone is welcome here." And I can't blame them. After all, you bring kids into this world and your first loyalty is to their safety. By the same token, ignoring signals of growing authoritarianism in the interest of peace and continuity has its obvious problems.

In my area, populated by many federal employees recently ordered to return to full-time in-person work, daily life will soon be overflowing (with little room for anything else). Residents will commute two-plus hours each way to crowded office buildings in D.C. so that voters in red states can be happy. Possibly the only ones among us who will have no choice but to pay attention to what happens in their own backyards are those who have already lost their jobs, activists at local NGOs serving immigrants and other vulnerable groups, and schoolchildren who, by necessity, see the horrors of this administration through the eyes of their vulnerable friends and parents.

For us adults, especially parents occupied with the care of our children, I'm reminded of how easy it is to ignore or forget what happens right in our own backyards. Recently, I read a *New York Times* article about a house in Poland on the edge of what used to be the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz, where its wartime commandant once lived. It overlooks a former gallows and the gas chambers where more than a million civilians were murdered, even as many

Poles then carried on with their daily lives. A widow who brought up two kids there in the post-war years called the house “a great place to raise children.”

I wish I could say that history has taught Americans about the human costs of war and the dangers of indifference to it. Yet, around here at least, as Donald Trump and his administration scapegoat immigrants to distract from the impunity of their own actions (particularly those of Elon Musk, perhaps the most prominent immigrant ever to work here “without a legal basis to remain in the United States”), the silence is deafening. It seems to matter not at all that the infamous all-American prison in Cuba from this country’s grim war on terror has now become the “homeland” for a new nightmare (and a half).

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*This piece first appeared on [TomDispatch](#).*

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