
TRUMP AND THE BORDER CRISIS

Explaining the Indefensible

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It is difficult to resist the temptation to rant against the ineptness and mean-spiritedness of the Trump Administration's recent border apprehension policies. Yet the moral and ethical obtuseness on display is the product of a long and complex history in which we all have a hand.

I recently participated in a panel discussion on the refugee crisis in the Middle East at the Jesuit university where I teach. I shared the podium with an undergraduate whose family had fled Syria and a colleague from the theology department. Responding to my co-panelists' heartfelt pleas for humanitarian relief to populations in distress, I attempted to sound a note of realism by pointing to the difficult judgments that must be made between individuals needing shelter from duress and those seeking "merely" to improve their life chances here. I argued that one reason Americans generally were not more welcoming of those genuinely seeking sanctuary was that this critical

The refusal to critically evaluate such claims and the intellectual confusion that sustains them are hardly limited to Catholics, or even to other believers. It is a refusal strongly reinforced by Americans' deeply engrained, virtually mythological misunderstanding of our history as "a nation of immigrants." As historian John Higham pointed out decades ago, Emma Lazarus's famous 1883 sonnet affixed to the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty praised "the Mother of Exiles" for welcoming not ordinary migrants but victims of anti-Jewish pogroms in Czarist Russia. Today, these people would be designated refugees. And yet the Statue is the symbol of our self-understanding as an immigrant nation.

This confusion has persisted and even flourished for many years now. In 1965 Lyndon Johnson signed the Hart-Celler Act, repealing the reviled national-origin quotas, which had been the basis of our immigration policy since 1924. He did so at a ceremony held at the base of the Statue of Liberty, and on that occasion thought it appropriate to also announce a new initiative to welcome refugees from communist Cuba. As Higham noted, "the revival of the myth of America as a refuge for the oppressed" was thereby affirmed. Decades later, U.S. Senator Marco Rubio got ensnared in this same farrago when he was criticized for claiming that his family was part of Florida's "exile community," even though his parents had freely chosen to emigrate from Cuba years before Castro's revolution.

There are two overlapping but distinct sources of confusion here. The first is definitional: who precisely is a refugee and how does a refugee differ from a migrant—or from an immigrant? The second is political and arises as participants in the global debates over these issues adapt their goals and frame their appeals to suit varied and changing contexts, constituencies, and audiences.

The starting point for definitional issues is the 1951 Geneva Convention, which declared a refugee to be "any person who . . . owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." Or, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) put it in a recent publication: "Refugees are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution . . . it is too dangerous for them to return home, and they need sanctuary elsewhere."

It is worth emphasizing that the 1951 Convention charged the UNHCR with superv

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undocumented Central American day laborers in suburban Long Island. Explaining why her efforts foundered, she describes these individuals as "settlers in fact but sojourners in attitude," and notes that they were "ambivalent about settling in the United States, their hope of maximizing their earnings in the short term and returning home a persistent counterweight to the increasing stake they held in their life here as the years piled up behind them." Since these findings were reported, it has undoubtedly become more

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directly? Should Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador become the 51st, 52nd, and 53rd states in the Union? Clearly, this is not what Americans—whether saddened or alarmed by this influx, whether on the Left or on the Right—have in mind.

What many commentators do seem to have in mind is opening our borders to as many of those fleeing the chaos in Central America as our laws and public opinion will tolerate—and then some. Yet down this path lies not only heightened domestic political strife, but continued self-serving intellectual and moral confusion about the drivers of such migrant streams.

One effort to grapple with this phenomenon is a forthcoming study by Jonathan Hiskey of Vanderbilt. Relying on fine-grained survey data from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala, Hiskey and his colleagues conclude that crime victimization and violence are much more significant drivers of migration out of the first two countries than out of Guatemala, where economic factors are clearly dominant.⁵ Another relevant resource is the research of Middlebury College anthropologist David Stoll, who has spent the past 20 years engaged in field work in Guatemala.

Stoll also emphasizes the continuing importance of economic factors in this crisis. Focusing primarily on Guatemala, his analysis defies just about all of our assumptions. To be sure, his basic perspective rings familiar: The present influx from Central America is the result of powerful, complex social and economic forces unleashed by America's economic and political involvement in the region since at least the civil wars of the 1970s. Similarly, Stoll acknowledges the civil strife and violence pushing women and children out of Central America and toward the U.S. border. Yet he definitely de-emphasizes these factors, pointing out, for example, that the violence such migrants encounter traveling through Mexico is as bad or worse than what they leave behind. As for gang violence, he argues that those leaving rural areas will likely face worse in U.S. cities.

Stoll's particular virtue is his almost microscopic analysis of the incentives pushing and pulling the human traffic between Central America and the United States. Consistent with what we know from other migratory streams, but at variance with virtually all recent media stories, he reminds us that those departing the region are not the poorest of the poor. On the contrary, they are likely to be from families who have benefitted from the increased resources that have flowed into the region from earlier trips north.

But as Stoll emphasizes, the dynamic here is far from simple. Small property owners have grown dependent on income from the United States to pay off debts incurred to buy land, build houses, or pay off loans to micro-lenders. Meanwhile, the money that continues to arrive from the United States has inflated the price of land and the cost of living. Another factor is that young people in Central America start having children in their mid-teens, and, as Stoll puts it, "at an early age, girls start producing armfuls of children who will not be able to support themselves by farming." So families who may have previously benefitted from the trek north now turn to this generation's males to undertake another such journey. But this may require, especially these days, the services of a smuggler, which almost certainly means going into more debt.

So those who leave the women and children behind are target earners. They are expected to send home as much of their earnings as possible, and then return home themselves. Yet they may not find work, or perhaps not enough for a surplus to send home. Then, too, many of these young men and boys (including teenagers with families to support) get caught up in their new lives up north, get drawn into alcohol or drugs, start second families, and generally renege on their obligations back home. One result, as Stoll reports, is village leaders in Guatemala asking him to help abandoned wives to get their husbands deported from the United States!

As for the women, they often feel compelled to journey north with children to find their men and reunite their families. This likely increases the need for a smuggler, hence more debt. If and when families are reunited in the United States, the comparative advantage of the lower cost of living in Central America is lost, and family members must work even harder to sustain the household.

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what point do we consider the impact of continued unskilled immigration not only on Americans, but on the wages and working conditions of earlier arrivals here who may still not be sure they want to be Americans? At what point do we begin to consider the extent to which our well-intended rationales to admit those seeking entry here may be tainted not only by our own self-interested need for their labor but by our need to flatter our moral vanity? It is hard to know, because we don't seem to be near any such point yet.

1John Higham, "The Transformation of the Statue of Liberty," in John Higham, *Send These To Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 78-87.

2Philip G. Schrag, *A Well-Founded Fear: The Congressional Battle to Save Political Asylum in America* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 251.

3William Julius Wilson and Richard P. Taub, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Racial, Ethnic, and Class Tensions in Four Chicago Neighborhoods and Their Meaning for America* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 105

4Jennifer Gordon, *Suburban Sweatshops: The Fight for Immigrant Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2005), 36, 70-71.

5Jonathan Hiskey et al., "Leaving the Devil You Know: Crime Victimization, U.S. Deterrence Policy, and the Emigration Decision in Central America," *Latin American Research Review*

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