

TRUMP'S INDIVIDUAL CLAIMS ABOUT IMMIGRANT TARGETS ARE FALSE-BUT SO IS THE LARGER PREMISE

There are a slew of legal challenges to Trump's war on immigrants: there are people illegally sent to Nayib Bukele's concentration camp, most notably Kilmar Abrego Garcia (whom Chris Van Hollen managed to meet yesterday); people sent to CECOT with no due process (including people with pending asylum claims and others picked up by mistake); grad students targeted for free speech; grad students targeted for low-level run-ins with the law; a US-born citizen, Juan Carlos Lopez-Gomez, detained for unlawful entry but since released; and at least three US citizens informed they must self-deport within seven days because their parole had been withdrawn.

Henry Josue Villatoro Santos is a fairly unique case. He was arrested to great fanfare in March, with Pam Bondi boasting over and over she had caught one of the top leaders of MS-13.

He was arrested not – as Bondi suggested – based off probable cause he was the top leader of MS-13. Rather, he was arrested based on an outstanding administrative immigration warrant and weapons purportedly found in a plain view search of his house, for which he was charged with possession of a firearm by an alien.

9. After knocking and announcing their presence to no avail, members of the FBI's Special Weapons and Tactics ("SWAT") Team breached the front and rear doors of the residence. After breaching the front door, SWAT agents observed VILLATORO in an alcove leading to the residence's garage. VILLATORO

ducked behind a small wall out of view and did not comply with the agents' demands that he exit the residence. After agents deployed a stun grenade, VILLATORO eventually came close enough to the front door to be pulled out of the residence.

10. VILLATORO was taken into custody on an outstanding administrative immigration warrant. When VILLATORO was being prepared for transport from the residence, he confirmed that the bedroom in the garage was his room and that a jacket inside that room was his.

11. FBI agents and TFOs proceeded to search the residence. Inside the aforementioned garage bedroom, a Taurus, model G2C, 9-millimeter handgun bearing serial no. ACH119455 was observed in plain view on a shelf near the bed. Based on my training and experience, I am aware that Taurus firearms are not manufactured in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Furthermore, the words "TAURUS ARMAS MADE IN BRAZIL" are stamped into the handgun's slide next to the serial number.

12. In that same garage bedroom, agents located three additional firearms, ammunition, and two suppressors.

Less than two weeks later, DOJ moved to dismiss the case against Villatoro. They moved to get rid of the case, their claims, and Villatoro himself the easy way, by quick and due process-free deportation.

On Tuesday, magistrate judge William Fitzpatrick granted DOJ's request (without requiring DOJ to offer the reason to dismiss), but granted a continuance to provide Villatoro a way to challenge deportation to CECOT.

Yesterday, Fitzpatrick granted Villatoro's request for a stay so he can appeal the

dismissal and try to stave off deportation to CECOT.

Villatoro's request for an emergency stay cited the effect that the evidence-free claims that Pam Bondi, among others, has made – just like she has been with Abrego Garcia.

Through its very public pronouncements and attacks on Mr. Villatoro Santos, including bellicose statements by the Attorney General, the FBI Director, the Virginia Governor, and President Trump himself, the Government has effectively placed a target on Mr. Villatoro's back: if he were to be deported to El Salvador, there is no doubt he will immediately be detained at CECOT without trial, and there will be no way out from there. And to be clear, this life-altering fate would result from the unproven allegations of a government that chose to forego criminal prosecution, where there is due process and a burden of proof to meet, in favor of deportation to a country in which there is little to no respect for the rule of law. Mr. Villatoro Santos faces the risk of an effective life sentence without trial, or worse.

If Abrego Garcia is ever brought back to the country, Pam Bondi's inflammatory allegations against him may limit the government's ability to dictate his fate; she obviously has prejudiced his ability to get a fair hearing. But Villatoro (who has not contested he had the guns) *is* in the country and so may be able to make something of the way Bondi claimed him to be something he's probably not.

It's not just that Trump's Administration is deporting people without due process. He's deporting people without due process *because* he needs to sustain false claims about them, to sustain a myth about invasion that Stephen Miller used to get Trump elected.

Meanwhile, Trump's false claims are collapsing at a more significant level.

On one level, there's Bukele's claims to oppose MS-13. As I noted here, there has been isolated reporting on Bukele's interest in preventing the real story of his relationship with MS-13 from being made public.

Asha Rangappa updates that with a description of how both Bukele and Trump have the need to claim their relationship with MS-13 is something it is not.

El Salvador has suffered from gang violence, led by Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, following decades of civil war from 1979 to 1992. According to an indictment brought by the Eastern District of New York against thirteen MS-13 gang members in 2022, various El Salvadoran administrations since the war ended entered into a "truce" with MS-13, in which the gang agreed to reduce homicides in the city "in exchange for transfers to less secure prisons, improved prison conditions, conjugal visits, cash payments, and other benefits and privileges." The "truce" came to a halt, however, in 2015 after the U.S. government, which wanted to curb MS-13's activity in the United States and bring them to justice here, increased pressure on El Salvador to return to restrictive prison conditions for gang members and extradite some of them to the U.S. In retaliation for the "truce" being lifted, MS-13 increased its violence both in El Salvador and in the U.S. In fact, the first Trump Justice Department created a task force, called Task Force Vulcan, to crack down on MS-13 in the U.S. – which is what led to the federal indictment noted earlier.

Enter Bukele. Bukele was elected in 2019, winning on a platform that promised to (once again) "crack down" on

gang violence. But his party, Nuevas Ideas, began secretly working to gain the support of a critical group: Yep, MS-13. Bukele and his party negotiated with the gang to bring back the “truce,” which would include (according to the federal indictment) “financial benefits, control of territory, the ability to run the gang from prison, and the early release of gang members.” MS-13 also wanted assurance that they wouldn’t be extradited to the U.S., where they would face more punitive measures. (Having studied the drug cartels in Colombia, this was reminiscent of Pablo Escobar’s mantra, “Mejor una tumba en Colombia, que una cárcel in los Estados Unidos” – which means, “Better a grave in Colombia than a jail cell in the United States.”) The same day Bukele’s party received a legislative majority in 2021, it removed the Attorney General and five members of the Supreme Court who had been working with the U.S. to take real action against MS-13. Bukele also released a major MS-13 leader whom the U.S. was seeking for extradition from prison.

In exchange, MS-13 “agreed to reduce the number of public murders in El Salvador, which politically benefitted the government, by creating the perception that the government was reducing the murder rate.” Indeed, Bukele’s popularity is the result of his so-called “**Territorial Control Plan**,” which involved building his supermax prison and his plan of mass incarceration – a plan which he credits for the drop in violence since he took office. Of course, the citizens of El Salvador aren’t privy to the secret negotiations Bukele made with MS-13 – details that were going to be made public when the U.S. government’s case against the MS-13 defendants went to trial. Which may explain why the Trump administration

quietly dropped these charges last week and put the charged MS-13 members on the third plane bound for El Salvador (and which included Abrego Garcia). Among the defendants was one of the highest-ranking leaders of MS-13, Cesar Humberto Lopez-Larios, who was arrested last June and added to the earlier indictment (and who almost certainly will not face real punishment in El Salvador). A former FBI agent who spent years working on this and other gang cases called it “a historical loss,” especially in terms of getting critical intelligence about MS-13’s operations and members in the United States.

In short, both Trump and Bukele appear to be complicit in a plan to allow MS-13 to operate in El Salvador on its own terms, in exchange for making it look like both are “cracking down” on the gang in their respective countries. Of course, the fact that MS-13 will continue to operate in cahoots with the El Salvadoran government means that citizens of that country who are victims of the gang will continue fleeing to the United States, undercutting the Trump administration’s claim that it is trying to end the “invasion” of asylum seekers. Then again, Trump needs a steady influx of people to continue trying to cross the border in order to keep claiming the “national emergency” he is using to expand his authority.

There’s a flip side to Trump’s propaganda, involving Trump’s false claims about Tren de Aragua.

Even at the Global Threats Hearings on March 26, otherwise focused on Mike Waltz’ Signal chat, Democrats asked Tulsi Gabbard why Tren de Aragua, which Trump had just declared was invading the country in a matter akin to war, was not even mentioned among the IC’s

description – prioritized as the primary threat for the first time – of transnational actors threatening the country.

Western Hemisphere-based TCOs and terrorists involved in illicit drug production and trafficking bound for the United States endanger the health and safety of millions of Americans and contribute to regional instability. Fentanyl and other synthetic opioids remain the most lethal drugs trafficked into the United States, causing more than 52,000 U.S. deaths in a 12-month period ending in October 2024. This represents a nearly 33 percent decrease in synthetic opioid-related overdose deaths compared to the same reporting time frame the previous year, according to CDC provisional data, and may be because of the availability and accessibility of naloxone.

Mexico-based TCOs—including the Sinaloa Cartel and the New Generation Jalisco Cartel—remain the dominant producers and suppliers of illicit drugs, including fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine, and South American-sourced cocaine, for the U.S. market. Last year, official points of entry along the U.S.-Mexico border were the main entry point for illicit drugs, often concealed in passenger vehicles and tractor trailers. However, some TCOs likely will at least temporarily change their smuggling techniques and routes in response to increased U.S. security force presence at the border.

Since at least 2020, the growth of Mexico-based independent fentanyl producers—actors who are autonomous or semiautonomous from Mexican cartel control—has increasingly fragmented Mexico’s fentanyl trade. Independent fentanyl producers are attracted to the

drug's profitability and the low barriers to market entry, including the ease of synthesizing it using basic lab equipment and few personnel.

Colombia-based TCOs and illegal armed groups are responsible for producing and exporting the vast majority of cocaine that reaches the United States, some of which is transshipped through Ecuador, contributing to an uptick in violent criminal conflicts that spurs regional migration.

Mexico-based TCOs are ramping up lethal attacks in Mexico against rivals and Mexican security forces using IEDs, including landmines, mortars, and grenades. In 2024, there were nearly 1,600 attacks on Mexican security forces using IEDs, surging from only three reported attacks between 2020- 2021. The sophistication of TCO tactics is reshaping Mexico's security landscape and has heightened the risk to security forces.

Tren de Aragua is not mentioned in the report; Venezuela is mentioned once (because, with Mexicans and Guatemalans, they are the migrants most commonly trying to enter the country through the Mexican border). El Salvador and MS-13 are likewise not mentioned.

But since then, the IC has done a National Intelligence Estimate that formalizes what became clear in the Threats Hearings. Of the 18 intelligence agencies who contributed to the assessment, only the FBI even claimed that the Venezuelan government was involved with TdA.

The National Intelligence Council, drawing on the acumen of the United States' 18 intelligence agencies, determined in a secret assessment early this month that the Venezuelan government is not directing an invasion

of the United States by the prison gang Tren de Aragua, a judgment that contradicts President Donald Trump's public statements, according to people familiar with the matter.

[snip]

The intelligence product found that although there are some low-level contacts between the Maduro government and Tren de Aragua, or TdA, the gang does not operate at the direction of Venezuela's leader. The product builds on U.S. intelligence findings in February, first reported by the New York Times, that the gang is not controlled by Venezuela.

An unnamed person in Tulsi's office accused the entire IC of a Deep State plot, pitting the DNI aggressively against her subordinates.

When asked about the findings, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence dismissed it as the work of "deep state actors" working in conjunction with the media.

"President Trump took necessary and historic action to safeguard our nation when he deported these violent Tren de Aragua terrorists," the statement said. "Now that America is safer without these terrorists in our cities, deep state actors have resorted to using their propaganda arm to attack the President's successful policies."

All of it – all of Trump's March campaign to invoke the Alien Enemies Act to start deporting people without due process – *all of it* is based on wildly unfounded propaganda, propaganda about who Bukele is, propaganda about what TdA is, propaganda about who these makeup artists and soccer players are.

There is a great deal of angst among centrist Democratic consultants and pundits that Trump will always have the upper hand on immigration. And while it's true that that's what has prevented Trump's polling from cratering, it is already the case that Americans don't like specific aspects of Trump's immigration policy.

The vast majority – 82% – of Americans believe Trump should obey court orders even if he disagrees with them, and 56% think he should stop “deporting people” (again, very vague) specifically:

What Americans think about Trump's conflict with the courts

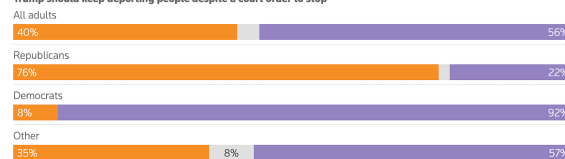
Reuters/Ipsos polled 1,030 U.S. adults on March 21-23, 2025

● Yes ● Did not answer ● No

The president should obey federal court rulings even if he disagrees with them



Trump should keep deporting people despite a court order to stop



Margin of error is +/- 3 percentage points for all adults and +/- 6 points for other groups.
By Jason Lange, Grant Smith and Iris Lee • Source: Reuters/Ipsos

But the details of the policy Trump is carrying out are even more removed from the polling – even more unpopular, reflecting deep reservations among the public about what the president is doing.

For example, when various pollsters asked if they would support deporting immigrants who have been here more than 10 years (as in the case of Abrego Garcia), U.S. adults said “no” by a 37 percentage point margin; Americans disapprove of deporting immigrants who have broken no laws other than laws governing entry; they oppose deporting U.S. citizens **convicted** of crimes to foreign jails, such as CECOT, and they oppose housing migrants at Guantanamo Bay while they are processed. All of these are policies the Trump

administration has now floated or is actively carrying out.

But here's what else the polling never accounted for: even in real time, it was clear Trump's strength on immigration was based on a massive campaign of propaganda (just as Trump had tried with less success in 2018 and 2020).

More than \$247 million was spent in the first six months of this year on television, streaming platform and digital ads that mention immigration, according to AdImpact, which tracks campaign advertising. That is \$40 million more than ads that mention any other issue.

Over 90 percent of the ads supported Republican candidates and were paid for by their campaigns or political action committees backing them.

The level of spending underscores how important Republicans view border security and immigration in this year's elections. While polls show voters overall rank issues at the border as less important to them than the economy, inflation and protecting democracy, Republican voters consistently rank it as among the most important.

The Washington Post analyzed the transcripts, images and on-screen text featured in more than 700 campaign ads that mention immigration and that ran from January through June for the presidential and Senate races, as well as congressional primaries and major state campaigns.

Taken as a whole, the ads convey an unrealistic portrait of the border as being overrun and inaccurately characterize immigrants generally as a threat, of which there is little evidence. FBI data show U.S. border

cities are among the nation's safest. And a 2023 report from a group of economists found immigrants are at least 30 percent less likely to be incarcerated than U.S.-born individuals.

Click through to that story, because it was extremely comprehensive, but also just a single story amid a campaign focused on other things.

Donald Trump won election by staging spectacular propaganda in places like Aurora, Colorado, where Stephen Miller tried to drown out the Republican Mayor's debunking of his false claims. Donald Trump won election by falsely accusing a productive group of Haitian immigrants were eating house pets. Trump won election by claiming that a bunch of criminal aliens safely held in US prisons were, instead wandering the streets.

Donald Trump won, in significant part by stoking fear of immigrants, based off a flood of propaganda that Democrats only responded to with whack-a-mole efforts to combat individual lies.

Thus far, Democrats are still largely fighting a game of whack-a-mole, though one facilitated by human interest and the Fifth Amendment.

Thus far, the campaign to fight back against Trump's authoritarian immigration crackdown has focused on individual stories: Abrego Garcia's efforts to raise his three American citizen children, Rumeysa Öztürk's research on how to make social media useful, Mohsen Mahdawi's empathy for both Palestinians and Jews. These are individuals, and once they are viewed as individuals, most Americans don't support their draconian treatment.

But it has yet to account for the fact that it is based on far bigger lies, bigger lies that Stephen Miller manufactured to justify claiming expansive powers in the name of fear.