

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مېباد بدین بوم و پر زنده یک تن مېباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

[JOANN WYPIJEWSKI](#)

14.04.2025

Disposable

I've seen disposable razors on mountaintops outside San Diego. I've seen plaid flannel shirts caught on the branches of low trees, trembling in the breeze near Bisbee. I've watched a pink backpack tumble across the desert floor. I've saved sheriffs' blotter reports; in one, 'human remains recovered in the desert' near Lukeville, Arizona, sounds as ordinary as a stolen car.

These traces date from the years when Obama was 'deporter-in-chief', though they might have been from any time since. In the US immigration control industry, people are raw material. Where agribusiness or tech or construction needs to exploit their bodies and their time, there is the soft violence of the visa system and contract labour. Where people's hopes and misery, their cunning and persistence, take more mercurial shape, there is an infrastructure that depends on human mobility, the manufactured terror of it, and the politico-economic necessity of that terror. 'Human remains' are a byproduct. America's politics of death, perennial but spreading like measles under the Trump regime, starts here.

Lukeville is one port of entry. About twenty miles north a checkpoint obtrudes upon the wild grace of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. It buzzes with trucks and helicopters, crawling with agents and dogs, there to intercept any drugs or aliens that got past the first hurdle. In reality, a Border Patrol agent in the nearby town of Ajo confided some ten years ago, they can achieve but two goals: grease the guard economy of surveillance and capture, and deny immigrants 'the easy ground', adding days to the trek from the border to Tucson or Phoenix over the harshest terrain. The agent estimated that they intercepted at most 9 per cent of smuggled substances.

The percentages may have changed. Expanded surveillance increased interdiction under Joe Biden. Last July, Customs in Lukeville scored the biggest fentanyl bust in US history when it

stopped a pickup truck hauling a utility trailer stuffed with 4 million pills, weighing half a ton. The 20-year-old driver, [like most](#) who have been busted at crossings in recent years, is an American. Panic over ‘Migrant Crime’ underestimates American criminal ingenuity – see the crumpling fentanyl addicts suffering from necrotic wounds, losing legs and arms because during the Covid-19 lockdown enterprising citizens began cutting fentanyl powder with xylazine, a legal veterinary sedative easily acquired online. Tranq, as the mixture is called, offers addicts a fix at half the usual street price for fentanyl and has made a terrible problem grotesque. There is no political will to address the demand side of the drug trade. Addicts are refused when not campaign props. As for migrants, a Border Patrol Death Review Team began [reporting fatalities](#) in 2022, of people in custody, being pursued, drowning, falling, dying of ‘distress’ – but not counting corpses discovered by hikers, their dogs, etc.

Dozens of quasi-militarized checkpoints like the one in Organ Pipe have long formed a fractured checkerboard across drivable stretches of the 1,954-mile border. Local and county police collaborate; their [dashcam videos](#) record the traffic stop, the friendly, entrapping exchange in Spanish, the telephone call, a child’s terror as federal agents swoop in and whisk their parent away. Donald Trump’s branding of the United States as a land without mercy has dissuaded newcomers. In the last seven days of January, Border Patrol agents apprehended 4,577 people trying to enter along the southern border, according to their new chief, Michael Banks. That is about half the number tallied in the seven days before Trump assumed power. The wonder is that it was that high. Apprehension data has always been understood to represent only a fraction of the whole. Somewhere, others make their way through enemy territory.

I’ve seen shadows dart across a dirt trail and disappear into a drainage pipe, a stone’s throw from a Border Patrol lookout by the Rio Grande in El Paso. I’ve walked scorching barrens near El Centro, California, with a church group placing water bottles on the ground to help travellers stay alive. I met a rancher in Texas who set out water to avoid finding another body on his property, and a man in Arizona who, having once had a government job collecting desert trash, habitually walked the land filling bags with the things people left behind – jackets, a single shoe, a glove, empty tins of fish, broken hand mirrors, old water bottles, plastic bags blowing like dandelion puffs in the wind.

The southern border will not be sealed by a wall. It will not be sealed by soldiers. The land winds and rises, extending from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific, with private ranches, vital truck routes, lakes, migratory animal paths, cross-border industrial sites, small towns and urban sprawl, craggy bluffs and mountains in between. From the air, the rugged northeast

approach to El Paso alone evokes maroon fantasies of other worlds. For decades, planks of steel have cut into the Pacific between Tijuana and San Diego. They have scarred the hilly curves outside and into Laredo. High gatelike structures have run for miles across flatlands, alongside which Border Patrol agents in marked trucks drive back and forth, or sit in wait.

The guard economy has grown consistently. So many livelihoods in once-Democratic border counties that went for Trump last November depend on it, even as the Border Patrol had extraordinary rates of [turnover](#) in his first term and increased rates of suicide. Sensors, towers, drones, infrared cameras, AI and the industries supplying such surveillance assets have proliferated. Under consecutive Democratic and Republican administrations, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) web pages have read like military procurement reports. In early 2012, the Obama Administration deployed US troops with high-tech surveillance equipment to conduct air and ground reconnaissance missions with the Border Patrol in New Mexico and Arizona. Army literature quoted commanders saying the operation was useful preparation for Afghanistan. All this, and still the land bears the signs of people on the move.

I've seen silhouettes scale the high gate and drop down at dusk somewhere outside Yuma. I've sat in court in Brownsville as a judge told an old man, 'Sir, yours is an unenviable situation', before ordering him deported to Uruguay, a country the man had not seen for forty years. I watched the same judge consign dozens of others to handcuffs and deportation no matter their circumstances – natural-born children or steady jobs or years of [paying taxes](#) – then hold his head in defeat amidst another day's work. 'My hands are tied', he lamented to those still awaiting judgement. 'You have to try to find a legal way to come over.' No one was spared.

A law firm advert advises would-be immigrants that the process for entering the country legally can take 'between a year and a lifetime'. In ordinary repressive times, those applying for family reunification typically wait fifteen years, longer if they are Indian, Filipino or Mexican. People fleeing imminent danger in their countries have long been told to expect to wait ten years between applying for asylum and getting an interview. Biden expedited application processes but not without the measure of cruelty American political culture demands. If you asked for asylum in every country you passed through, and then used a smart phone app to ask for an appointment to make your case to the US government, and kept checking that app, sometimes every day, waiting to hear back while living in a shelter in Mexico, in two to three months you might get an appointment. If you hadn't thought, 'Desperation? There must be an app for that', and instead crossed the river and presented

yourself to Border Patrol for asylum, you were presumed ineligible and deported. It was, as Father Brian Strassburger of the Del Camino Jesuit Border Ministries based in Brownsville recently remarked, a carrot and stick policy; with Trump, it's stick and stick. Any waitlist estimate shorter than a lifetime appears moot now – unless you're an Afrikaner, invited by executive order to seek asylum as part of an oppressed white minority, despite Trump's decree eliminating asylum.

I've driven through new-immigrant neighbourhoods, recognizing them by drivers' scrupulous respect for the rules of the road. Documented Americans tend to drive with contempt. I met a teenager in Phoenix whose father, undocumented, let her drive herself to school after she vowed to take one route only, never deviate or stop on a whim. I remember Springfield, Ohio, before the Haitians came. It was not, as Trump stated in his speech to Congress, beautiful. I remember abandoned houses (many since reclaimed by immigrants), and falling wages (the trend lines angling up with immigration-led population growth). I watched a white man at a dingy American Legion bar make slurs about a black candidate while his race-mates, hard men and brittle women nursing beers or hunched over betting games, nodded or said nothing. There are 11 million people without papers in the United States, and about 2 million awaiting asylum decisions. The question is, why are so many Americans moved to fear them? The more or less materialist answers are insufficient. None can fully explain the zeal to punish the equivalent of one's own great-grandfather. The utility of that emotion, for those who stoke it, is easier to discern.

Trump's one consistent campaign theme was moral panic over 'Migrant Crime'. He was not coy: immigrants are 'poisoning the blood of our country'; they especially threaten black men, Latinos and their households, he said. This rhetoric dominated MAGA email blasts, followed by talk of Trump's own persecution, the danger of trans people and of Kamala Harris as 'low IQ', 'lazy as hell', a 'DEI hire'.

In triumph, Trump has been more honest than the right-wing hacks, liberal pundits and left intellectuals who cling to the notion that populist economics were his pitch and draw. As he was inaugurated on 20 January, 30,000 scheduled asylum appointments were cancelled. At the Juarez/El Paso crossing, people who had waited in line for hours experienced 'uncontrollable shock', according to a reporter for the *El Paso Times*. Then came the revoking of protected status for some half-million refugees, among them Springfield's Haitians. Then began the raids: 8,768 people detained nationwide by 3 February, with ICE broadcasting its daily arrest numbers for a time, and the media covering the knock-on effects: schools missing children, day labour pick-up sites empty of men, the who knows how many

people in hiding who had ‘followed the rules’ – so important to this nation of scofflaws. Then came the troops, and the military flights of shackled immigrants to El Salvador, Guantanamo. Promised revenge, Trump’s ‘new base’ in the multicultural working class has got nothing else. The triad of havoc, cruelty and spectacle has formed the template for all that has followed.

I met a man fiddling with sensors behind his house in Arizona, a bigoted, lonesome man with fever dreams of a government contract and borderlands blanketed with his invention, every enemy footfall imagined to trigger a rapid armed response.

I try to track the news behind the news: local governments mull adding Teslas to their fleets; the State Department’s plan to spend \$400 million on armoured Tesla Cybertrucks is amended to the more demure ‘electric vehicles’; the Commerce Department deems satellite services eligible for broadband grants; the Federal Communications Commission looks favourably on \$900 million in potential subsidies for Elon Musk’s Starlink satellite service; the Federal Aviation Administration is using Starlink in air traffic control; two explosions of Musk’s Starship rocket in two tries since January underscore the basic function of military space programmes. I remember the late Pierre Sprey, a fighter jet designer turned Pentagon critic, summing up an extravagant, error-riddled project decades ago: ‘It’s nothing but a sewer pipe between the Treasury and the contractors, a very low-tech sewer pipe.’

The tech oligarchs and lesser billionaires who stood behind Trump as he took the oath of office are also government contractors. Musk holds out his hand for some \$30 billion a year in corporate welfare. Although far from the biggest share of Pentagon largesse – at least \$53 billion in military contracts to the tech industry across 2018-22, according to researchers at San Jose State and Brown University – the tech sector’s portion is growing, as is its stake in the money pot juiced by the scaremongering about ‘Migrant Crime’.

In late February, Senate Republicans presented a budget proposing \$175 billion for immigration and border enforcement. How much of that was envisioned for high-tech systems, or ‘completing’ the wall, or hiring agents, or funding private prisons, or building concentration camps (Trump’s ‘border czar’, Tom Homan, dreams of confining 100,000 people at a time) is unclear. The figure proposed is almost six times the previous budgets for CBP and ICE combined. (These state functions, along with the Pentagon’s larded systems, are not subject to Musk’s alleged crusade against waste and fraud.) House Republicans sought smaller though still formidable increases for immigration crackdowns, a minor sacrifice for their primary aim: \$4.5 trillion in permanent tax cuts benefiting the oligarchs and corporate class. The Republicans’ mid-March Continuing Resolution to avoid a government

shutdown – essentially a blackmail note, paid by enough Senate Democrats to let the bill proceed to a vote – sets out their basic agenda of ceding congressional authority to the executive, bolstering the violence programme and letting people die in the wreckage of social welfare.

I remember the glee in a man's voice in November as he, a Latino, flouted his notional supervisor, a Bangladeshi woman with seniority but no power, at a CVS: 'Mr Trump is back; I can do anything I want.' 'I cried', Jared Evans, a therapist fired from a Veterans Administration medical centre told a reporter after Musk's onslaught against federal workers. 'You're just kind of free-falling now.'

Not everyone who voted MAGA did so because of the hatred. As in 2016, they just didn't let the cruelty, or Trump's lifelong penchant for swindle, get in the way. This is the crux of the regime: cruelty and swindle. They are evident in all its conduct – from fleecing acolytes in the pump-and-dump of Trump's meme coin, to coveting a depopulated Gaza as real estate; from choking off disease prevention in Africa and stiffing US farmers and others of billions owed by USAID, to offsetting tax cuts by threatening people in nursing homes and 37 million children who depend on Medicaid; from dismembering Social Security to make it ripe for privatization, to attacking the civil rights of disabled and other students (protection of which is the doomed Education Department's *raison d'être*) for the benefit of high donors who despise public education; from eliminating public guardrails against fraud, to ditching a dozen or so investigations into Musk's federal contracts or alleged abuses of workers and animals, while empowering him and his DOGE delinquents to hack databases of Americans' personal information.

Naturally, such a project requires unchecked power (as does kidnapping pro-Palestine protesters, driving universities toward recession, busting federal workers' unions and flouting the judiciary, however many lawsuits have been filed or judgements dispensed). Its manifestations may be profound or petty: the US Naval Academy banning biographies of Martin Luther King, Jackie Robinson and Einstein in the purge of DEI. Its attraction to the unsavoury is plain: in the name of prioritizing 'Migrant Crime', Trump disbanded the Justice Department's cryptocurrency investigation unit, having earlier embraced 'all things related to' the dodgy crypto industry (his meme coin is an ideal conduit for bribes). Every move is a means toward an end, not the end itself. So not everyone dependent on federal aid or protection will die, just as not every undocumented person or protester will be disappeared. But some will not make it.

As the nation's vast prison state and reliance on war machinery attest, Americans have for a very long time not let cruelty get in the way. Nor are the struts of the regime new; the right's ideologues have been organizing for decades. What's remarkable is the swiftness with which Trump pivoted from satisfying his voters' enjoyment of the disposability of despised populations to demonstrating that those voters, too, are disposable. Two examples will have to do. Sixty-five per cent of US veterans voted for Trump, say exit polls; veterans make up 30 per cent of the federal workforce. The Department of Veterans Affairs, which both serves and employs them, aims to put 80,000 jobs to Musk's chainsaw. Seventy per cent of West Virginians voted for Trump, his second highest victory margin; the state – one of the poorest, most unhealthy, least educated and lowest-waged in the country – ranks third in the percentage of its total workforce employed by the federal government. Many others there rely on federal benefits to eat, as do many families elsewhere who live on military bases. Rural people, who voted overwhelmingly for Trump, tell reporters they did not count on sacrificing their schools.

While no one surviving on Social Security can be certain that this month's cheque will arrive, everyone will learn that the tariffs may mean freedom from what Trump has called 'dirty', 'disgusting' foreign food but not from high prices, or joblessness. Even before 'Liberation Day', public and private employers had kicked at least 390,992 workers to the curb. Where the left once looked for splits in elite opinion, the regime's raids on people's lives – not just their income but their being – make fractures in popular opinion a potentially more fruitful place to look.

Trump's politics of death and desire is no mere continuation of the status quo, but nor is it sheer chaos. The scheme of moral panic, pain, privatization and swindle has a ruthless coherence. Beyond the thrill of competition, it depends on humiliation, and not just of the enemy. Trump himself has less an ideology than a pathological self-interest and a knack for performance that, in its mix of malice and beguilement, reads the culture. His project was condensed twenty years ago in the theme song for *The Apprentice*, 'For the Love of Money'; and in his signature line in the faux boardroom, 'You're Fired!' It was always easy to understand why corporate autocrats and evangelists for a new Gilded Age of rule by 'high IQ' individuals would line up once this formula became overtly political. More puzzling was the pleasure among Trump rallygoers as they bellowed with their hero the command signifying their own powerlessness: 'You're Fired!'

The phrase encapsulates the lonely catastrophe of so many US workers since mass layoffs began in the 1970s, were normalized in the 1980s, accelerated through the 1990s and have

been accommodated since – the social disaster so expertly examined by Louis Uchitelle in *The Disposable American*. Amidst the joy of communal experience, ‘You’re Fired!’ also represented, perhaps, the mastery for which Trump’s people yearned, his brazen cupidity become a reflection of their own desires for licence, power, a lucky break. The dissonance is greater now that reality is not a show, and the slogan is a literal notice of a really bad break.

Read on: Jesse Diaz & Javier Rodriguez, ‘[Undocumented in America](#)’, NLR 47.

<https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/disposable?pc=1669>

11 APRIL 2025 [SOCIETY](#)