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Angry that ICE is ripping families apart? Don't just blame Trump. Blame Clinton, Bush and Obama, too.

The militarization of immigration enforcement.

By Carly Goodman

Last week, about 200 federal agents swarmed a gardening business in Ohio. They arrested 114 workers suspected of being undocumented, carting them off to immigration jails in the surrounding area. Their children, who had been dropped off at day care and school that morning, were left without parents to pick them up. In just a few hours, hundreds of lives were disrupted and families ripped apart.

Arrests, detentions and deportations are happening routinely as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the agency responsible for immigration enforcement in the interior of the country, targets and seizes workers, parents, children and neighbors in U.S. communities. But these kinds of brutal actions — which appear to have intensified under President Trump — are not simply a result of his election. Rather, they are the product of our country's narrowing view, formed under both Democratic and Republican administrations, of immigration as primarily a national security issue.

Although the mistreatment of newcomers and people of color in the United States has a long history — often justified in the name of security — ICE is itself a new agency, created in the aftermath of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. But the sense of insecurity that fueled the creation of ICE has been growing since the 1990s, and decisions to manage immigration as largely a security issue created the conditions for what we are seeing from ICE today.

In 1990, Congress passed a broad immigration bill that it argued would serve the national interest by increasing the overall number of immigrants admitted to the country. When signing the bipartisan measure into law, President George H.W. Bush said that it "recognizes the fundamental importance and historic contributions of immigrants to our country." But by the middle of the decade, the country would adopt a far less welcoming stance.

Two unrelated events helped shape the conversation about how immigrants should be treated. In February 1993, the World Trade Center bombing sparked a conversation that linked immigration control and counterterrorism when it came to light that two of the people implicated in the attack had applied for asylum in the United States. The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), an organization with racist roots that had long sought to restrict immigration, used the attack to advance its cause, appearing on a high-profile episode of "60 Minutes" that framed asylum seekers as threatening and shaped the legislative efforts to come. As historian Maria Cristina Garcia has argued, this event led to restricting the entry of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers who were now presumed to be threats to American life.

That June when the Golden Venture, a smuggling ship carrying hundreds of people from China, ran aground in Queens, several passengers died — and the accident added to the country's already palpable sense of insecurity. It's not that the passengers of the Golden Venture were thought to pose a specific security threat to the United States; it was clear from the conditions on the ship that these passengers had undertaken the journey out of desperation and fear, seeking a better life.

But the ship's crash — particularly in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack — exacerbated public concern that migration was out of control. President Bill Clinton, speaking to reporters in July, said that he would not "surrender our borders to those who wish to exploit our history of compassion and justice. We cannot tolerate those who traffic in human cargo, nor can we allow our people to be endangered by those who would enter our country to terrorize Americans."

Rather than releasing the Golden Venture passengers while they awaited asylum hearings, the Clinton administration decided to detain most of them in jails and prisons, to demonstrate its attention to the increasingly fraught immigration policy debate. Immigration detention was not widespread at the time — in 1994, there was room for fewer than 7,000 people per day in immigrant detention centers nationwide. (By comparison, the Trump administration anticipates holding 47,000 people daily by 2019.)

These events helped catalyze a nativist backlash against immigrants, and in 1996, Congress passed several punitive laws that curtailed immigrants' rights, including the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, the

Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.

As part of its crackdown, Congress made it far easier for the government to detain and deport people and far more difficult for people without lawful status to get it. The aggressive 1996 laws significantly increased the number of people being detained and deported from the United States.

The attacks of Sept. 11 helped deepen the government's conflation of national security, counterterrorism and immigration enforcement. Creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), President George W. Bush and Congress moved immigration management from the Justice Department to the DHS, signaling a major institutional shift in how the United States thought about immigration, clearly framing it as a security issue.

In the post-Sept. 11 atmosphere, ICE, then a new agency, set out an ambitious and opportunistic agenda. Titled "Endgame," the strategic plan for ICE's Office of Detention and Removal set as its goal 100 percent "removal" of all "removable aliens." Grandparents and children, business owners and colleagues, students and caregivers: All became the targets of ICE.

But Operation Endgame did not explain how punishing and deporting millions of longtime residents would make the United States safer or somehow address the threat of terrorist violence. It simply asserted that the result of these deportations would be "enhanced homeland security" — an ill-defined goal that seemed to answer the public's fear with aggression — and more fear — rather than sound policy.

Between 1990 and 2002, the budget of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS, previously the agency in charge of immigration services and enforcement) increased fivefold. After the creation of DHS and ICE, the budget for immigration enforcement went up even more quickly, doubling from $6.2 billion in 2002 to $12.5 billion in 2006.

Operation Endgame was not the final solution it promised to be. But ICE strengthened its position within the bureaucracy, reinforcing the immigrants-as-threat frame and further embedding it within local law enforcement throughout the country. By 2013, the United States was spending more on immigration enforcement than on FBI, Secret Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration and all other federal criminal law enforcement agencies combined, and holding more people in immigration detention than those serving sentences in the federal prison system.

The Obama administration later tried to re-prioritize ICE's operations by focusing the deportation force on "felons, not families." Yet this guidance not only rested on a false dichotomy (felons have families, after all) but also reinforced the fusion of immigration and "threat" in the public conversation. Although advocacy efforts, court challenges and public criticism pushed the administration to narrow its enforcement priorities in 2014 and resulted in a decline in ICE arrests, the deportation machinery remained robust.

Trump fueled his unlikely presidential campaign with anti-immigrant rhetoric, characterizing immigrants as menacing threats. Upon taking office, he signed an executive order that more than doubled the number of ICE officers, deputized more local police departments to track down immigrants, broadened ICE priorities, and limited due process and discretion. ICE agents under Trump feel that the "shackles" have come off, and morale at the agency is up.

As DHS secretary, John Kelly issued a memo authorizing ICE to take action against all "removable noncitizens" and although he later conceded that the vast majority are "not bad people," they are targeted for deportation nonetheless. Operation Endgame's goal of 100 percent removal has been resurrected, this time supported by a well-resourced agency now 15 years old, bolstered by continual attacks on and dehumanizing language about immigrants by top-level officials.

The turn toward securitizing immigration enforcement since the 1990s has made detentions and deportations seem normal and even necessary for national security. They aren't. Our policies should recognize that no matter where we were born, all people deserve to be treated humanely.

ICE's purpose today is to forcibly remove people from their homes, actions that destroy lives, families and neighborhoods. Rather than making communities safer, Trump's policies terrorize and threaten ordinary people, creating an atmosphere of fear.

And if we don't open our eyes to the human costs of this approach to immigration — and stop funding this work in our name — families will continue to be torn apart, workers taken from their jobs, children left without parents — and, despite protestations to the contrary, all of us will be less safe.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/06/11/angry-that-ice-is-ripping-families-apart-dont-just-blame-trump-blame-clinton-bush-and-obama-too/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6361f98494a5