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Fences Make Bad Hombres: Trump in Latin America

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It starts, of course, with the wall. From its earliest moments, the campaign of Donald Trump for the presidency of the United States was predicated on hardening the border between the United States and Mexico, and by extension, between the United States and Latin America—the border where, as Gloria Anzaldúa wrote more than three decades ago, “the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.”¹ Rubbing salt in those borderland wounds, Trump began his campaign with a call to seal the United States off from supposed horrors emerging from the south, rendering ‘drugs’ and ‘crime’ as external threats carried across the border by people themselves deemed ‘illegal.’

With increasingly explicit incantations of looming demographic change and social disorder pushed by advisors like Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, the Republican Party under Trump proudly mainstreamed racist, xenophobic ideas that many thought had been relegated to the fringe. The consequences of such mainstreaming were devastating: the online manifesto of the man who opened fire with a semi-automatic rifle in a Walmart parking lot in El Paso in 2019, killing 23 people and injuring dozens more, for example, made clear that he specifically targeted Mexicans, citing the “great replacement” conspiracy theory about a “Hispanic invasion.”² It was a conspiracy theory that predated Trump, to be sure, but one that his administration amplified—the actual history of a place like Texas, of the border itself, be damned. Indeed, the call to ‘Make America Great Again’ entailed a mobilization of the history of relations between the United States and Latin America based on a pernicious mix of nostalgic return and selective forgetting.

Foregoing a claim to the future, Trump instead repeatedly drew from the past, seeking to recover lost glory by either glossing over or openly celebrating the mistakes, failures, and outrages of previous eras. Over the course of his presidency, Trump marshaled three broad themes in the history of U.S.–Latin American relations: mobilizing an imagined past in which U.S. dominance in the region was unquestioned; deploying an often anachronistic but nonetheless virulent anti-Communism that was focused on left-leaning leaders and movements; and stoking nativist anti-immigrant sentiment towards people coming from Mexico, Central America, and what he called “shithole” countries such as Haiti.³ In the administration’s early days, Trump’s personalist deal-making did drive some policy in the region, as when he lifted a ban on the import of Argentine lemons shortly after receiving permits to build a new office complex in Buenos Aires, demonstrating what Tom Long astutely summarized as Trump’s “short-term transactionalism.”⁴ But as it developed over his four years in office, Trump’s rhetoric and resultant policy toward Latin America often took the tone of a paean to imperial power—power that had been lost, or ceded, by previous administrations.

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987): 3.

² Philip Rucker, “‘How Do you Stop these People?’: Trump’s Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric Looms over El Paso Massacre,” *Washington Post*, August 4, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-do-you-stop-these-people-trumps-anti-immigrant-rhetoric-looms-over-el-paso-massacre/2019/08/04/62d0435a-b6ce-11e9-a091-6a96e67d9cce_story.html.

³ Ali Vitali, Kasie Hunt and Frank Thorp V, “Trump Referred to Haiti and African Nations as ‘Shithole’ Countries,” NBC News, January 11, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-referred-haiti-african-countries-shithole-nations-n836946>.

⁴ Tom Long, “From Trump to Biden in Latin America,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 53:2 (2021): 121-126. On Argentine lemons, see Christy Thornton, “An Empire Upside Down,” *Dollars & Sense*, July/August 2017, <http://www.dollarsandsense.org/archives/2017/0717thornton.html>.

Though President Barack Obama's Secretary of State John Kerry had won cautious plaudits in the region for asserting in 2013 that "the era of the Monroe Doctrine is over," Trump's team was keen to reverse course and reassert U.S. prerogative in the Western Hemisphere.⁵ Trump's preference for exerting domination over building consensus could be seen when the president insisted on installing a right-wing Cuban-American member of his National Security Council, Mauricio-Claver Carone, as president of the Inter-American Development Bank—defying sixty years of tradition that held that a Latin American should head the multilateral institution.⁶ Indeed, Trump made his desire to return to an era of untrammelled U.S. power in the region explicit, invoking the Monroe Doctrine by name in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 2018.⁷

National Security Advisor John Bolton repeated Trump's reaffirmation shortly thereafter when questioned why the Trump administration tolerated authoritarians in other regions of the world but pushed for regime change in Venezuela. "In this administration," Bolton told a television reporter, "we're not afraid to use the phrase 'Monroe Doctrine.'"⁸ If the doctrinal justification harkened to the nineteenth century, however, the historical lineage Bolton summoned was that of Cold War 'democracy promotion.' Venezuela was a country in *this* hemisphere, he argued, and "it had been the objective of presidents going back to Ronald Reagan to have a completely democratic hemisphere." Bolton then doubled down on this logic in a speech to Bay of Pigs veterans in Florida in which he proclaimed that "the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well."⁹ In that speech, Bolton named Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua as the "troika of tyranny," a pale imitation of George W. Bush's "axis of evil." While the phrase failed to catch on, the fearmongering over the threat of socialist subversion endured and reverberated domestically, becoming a key theme for the Trump administration, especially as it approached the reelection campaign—not least in the key state of Florida.

Trump's electoral politics in Florida made clear the contours of a "foreign policy for domestic consumption," and encouraged the revivification of a number of Cold War specters.¹⁰ Cuba was, unsurprisingly, central, as Bolton's 2019 celebration of Bay of Pigs veterans—literal Cold Warriors—made clear. Though Trump had been somewhat noncommittal on Cuba during his first campaign, once in office he quickly began to roll back the Obama administration's attempts to normalize relations with the island, imposing new sanctions and reinstating travel restrictions, seeking even to end long-standing educational exchanges.¹¹ Closely linked to Cuba was Venezuela, which supplied important aid and oil to the island in defiance of the decades-long U.S. blockade. During the Trump years, in fact, invocations of both Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez—both already dead by the time Trump assumed office—became routine, as when Trump's lawyer argued in November 2020 that Chávez, who died in 2013, had somehow conspired with president-elect Joe Biden to rig that year's election.¹² As though haunted by ghosts, the Trump administration frequently tried to pull relations with Latin America back to an earlier era, one where Cold War anti-Communism provided an organizing principle for U.S. power in the region.

Stoking this anti-Communist sentiment was a surprising figure far from the center of U.S. electoral politics: former Colombian president Álvaro Uribe. As the analyst Adam Isacson has written, Uribe's influence on those in the Trump circle became especially clear during the

⁵ John Kerry, Remarks on U.S. Policy in the Western Hemisphere, November 18, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/11/217680.htm>.

⁶ Christy Thornton, "U.S.-IADB: A Last-Ditch Effort at Securing U.S. Hegemony?," AULABlog, September 30, 2020, <https://aulablog.net/2020/09/30/u-s-iadb-a-last-ditch-effort-at-securing-u-s-hegemony/comment-page-1>.

⁷ Address by the President of the United States of America H. E. Mr. Donald Trump, New York, September 25, 2018, https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/73/us_en.pdf.

⁸ "What is the Monroe Doctrine? John Bolton's Justification for Trump's Push against Maduro," *Washington Post*, March 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/03/04/what-is-monroe-doctrine-john-boltons-justification-trumps-push-against-maduro>.

⁹ Ambassador Bolton remarks to the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association – Brigade 2506, April 17, 2019, <https://cu.usembassy.gov/ambassador-bolton-bay-of-pigs-veterans-association-brigade-2506>.

¹⁰ Renata Keller, "A Foreign Policy for Domestic Consumption: Mexico's Lukewarm Defense of Castro, 1959–1969," *Latin American Research Review* 47:2 (September 7, 2012): 100–119.

¹¹ Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, U.S.-Cuba Relations, May 12, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-cuba-relations>.

¹² Fox News alert, November 19, 2020, https://twitter.com/David_Leavitt/status/1329494629138444288.

reelection campaign, when Trump ran a Spanish-language ad in Florida that linked Joe Biden to Castro, Chávez, current Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, and Colombian senator and former guerrilla Gustavo Petro.¹³ The mention of Petro—who was far from a household name in the United States—was a clear marker of the influence of Uribe, who had been leading a campaign against socialism in the region and had coined the epithet “Castro-Chavismo” to describe the influence of left movements and parties throughout the Americas.¹⁴ Trump directly deployed Uribe’s language repeatedly during the campaign, as when he tweeted on October 10, “Joe Biden is a PUPPET of CASTRO-CHAVISTAS,” arguing that Biden, who had defeated the socialist Bernie Sanders, was himself “weak on socialism.”¹⁵

Uribe’s influence was also visible when, during the campaign, Trump brought up the historic peace plan negotiated by Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos that would have ended the nearly six-decade armed conflict between the state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC; *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*)—against which Uribe successfully spearheaded an opposition campaign. At a September campaign rally in Jacksonville, Trump slammed what he called the “Obama-Biden-Santos deal with Colombian drug cartels,” arguing that the previous administration had “surrendered to the narco terrorists.”¹⁶ Though few voters in the United States were likely motivated by concerns about the internal politics of Colombia, Uribe’s frame of *Castro-Chavismo* served as a useful shorthand for Republican electioneering about the dangers of socialism.

If the specters of Castro and Chávez hung over Trump’s campaigning, his policy summoned other Cold War ghosts, too. The political resurrection of Elliott Abrams, in particular, revealed how a history of hardline anti-Communism could overcome even Trump’s personal antipathy. Abrams had overseen key aspects of the Reagan administration’s brutal support for counterinsurgency in Central America in the 1980s, calling U.S. policy in El Salvador—where a UN Truth Commission found that the U.S.-backed military and paramilitary death squads killed more than 75,000 civilians—a “fabulous achievement.”¹⁷ He was also convicted for lying to Congress during the Iran-Contra affair, but was pardoned by the George H.W. Bush administration before serving again under the younger Bush. Abrams, however, had publicly criticized Trump during the 2016 campaign, and Trump had to be convinced by his Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, to appoint the Cold War hawk as special envoy to Venezuela. At Pompeo’s insistence, Abrams was brought on to handle Venezuela policy in the same week that Trump, urged on by anti-Maduro lawmakers like senators Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Robert Menendez (D-NJ), announced that the United States was withdrawing recognition from the Maduro government and instead officially recognizing opposition upstart Juan Guaidó as the interim president of Venezuela. Trump then signaled his intent to exert “maximum pressure” to force regime change in Venezuela, a task he assumed would be “low-hanging fruit” for the United States, expecting a “major foreign policy victory.”¹⁸

Despite dragging Abrams’s legacy in the 1981 El Mozote massacre and Iran-Contra into its Venezuela policy, however, the Trump administration had none of the major victories it anticipated. Though the United States did convince a host of other countries to recognize Guaidó—whose ability to bring together the notoriously fractious Venezuelan opposition remained limited, to say the least—Abrams and the Trump administration ultimately had little to show for their sanctions and saber rattling. Maduro remains in office, and

¹³ Adam Isacson, “Trump, ‘Castro-Chavismo,’ and the Centro Democrático,” WOLA, October 19, 2020, <https://colombiapeace.org/trump-castro-chavismo-and-the-centro-democratico>; Rafael Bernal, “Trump Spanish-Language Ad Equates Progressives, Socialists,” *The Hill*, August 3, 2020, <https://thehill.com/latino/510268-trump-spanish-language-ad-equates-progressives-socialists>.

¹⁴ Tim Padgett, “Is Colombia Interfering In The U.S. Election In Florida – With Tactics It Exported To Florida?” WLRN, September 22, 2020, <https://www.wlrn.org/2020-09-22/is-colombia-interfering-in-the-u-s-election-in-florida-with-tactics-it-exported-to-florida>.

¹⁵ Adam Isacson, “Trump, ‘Castro-Chavismo,’ and the Centro Democrático,” WOLA, October 19, 2020, <https://colombiapeace.org/trump-castro-chavismo-and-the-centro-democratico>.

¹⁶ Donald Trump Campaign Rally Transcript, Jacksonville, FL, September 24, 2020, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-jacksonville-fl-campaign-rally-transcript-september-24>

¹⁷ David Corn, “Elliott Abrams: It’s Back!” *The Nation*, June 14, 2001, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/elliott-abrams-its-back/>; Raymond Bonner, “What Did Elliott Abrams Have to Do With the El Mozote Massacre?,” *The Atlantic*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/ilhan-omar-elliott-abrams-and-el-mozote-massacre/582889>.

¹⁸ Ishaan Tharoor, “Trump’s Maximum Pressure Tactics are Incoherent,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/06/21/trumps-maximum-pressure-tactics-are-incoherent>.

Venezuela's humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by COVID-19, only worsened with Trump's escalating sanctions.¹⁹ Perhaps the most important accomplishment of the Trump Venezuela strategy was ensuring a surprising continuity into the next administration, as Biden has thus far largely continued Trump's "maximum pressure" approach, with the added step of converting the Trump administration's last-minute granting of Deferred Enforced Departure for Venezuelans in the United States into Temporary Protected Status (TPS) — a move that anti-immigrant hardliners in the Trump administration had been unwilling to make.²⁰

Venezuela wasn't the only country in the region to experience an upheaval of leadership during the Trump years. In another echo of the Cold War, the Trump administration's supposed reverence for 'democracy promotion'—invoked by Bolton with regard to Venezuela—foundered elsewhere on its commitment to supporting right-wing regimes with anti-socialist agendas. The cases of Brazil, Bolivia, and Honduras make this tendency clear.

Trump was a close ally of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, who was elected after a series of dubious legal maneuvers ousted former president Dilma Rousseff and prevented her predecessor, Ignacio 'Lula' da Silva, from running for president again.²¹ Bolsonaro modeled his presidency on Trump's in many ways, constantly denouncing "fake news" and downplaying the emergence of COVID-19 as a "little flu," thereby creating the conditions for one of the most devastating outbreaks in the entire world, with an official death toll that now stands below that of only the United States.²² Even as Bolsonaro stoked talk of the return of the country's Cold War military dictatorship, explicitly casting doubt on the democratic process in Brazil, close ties between the Bolsonaro family and Trump advisors like Jared Kushner continued.²³ The insistence on democracy, as was the case during the long Cold War, was for enemies, not allies.

Similarly, in Bolivia, the Trump administration was quick to throw its weight behind an insurgent right. After a flawed statistical analysis led the Organization of American States (OAS) to argue that then-president Evo Morales had rigged his already controversial 2019 re-election, Morales fled the country under military pressure and the little-known senator Jeanine Áñez used a series of parliamentary procedures to declare herself the interim president.²⁴ Trump quickly recognized the new leader, and subsequently turned a blind eye when the Áñez government unleashed a wave of violent repression against supporters of former president Morales.²⁵ Trump even sent National Security Council official Mauricio Claver-Carone to Bolivia to meet with Áñez and offer his support for her leadership. There, Claver-

¹⁹ Alexander Main, "Out of the Ashes of Economic War," *NACLA*, April 2, 2020, <https://nacla.org/news/2020/07/16/out-ashes-economic-war>.

²⁰ Sabrina Rodriguez, "Trump Grants Venezuelans Temporary Legal Status on His Way Out," *Politico*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/19/trump-venezuela-temporary-legal-status-460524>; "US Citizenship and Immigration Service, Designation of Venezuela for Temporary Protected Status and Implementation of Employment Authorization for Venezuelans Covered by Deferred Enforced Departure," <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/03/09/2021-04951/designation-of-venezuela-for-temporary-protected-status-and-implementation-of-employment>; "Rubio Welcomes Designation of Temporary Protected Status for Eligible Venezuelan Nationals in the U.S.," March 8, 2021, <https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2021/3/rubio-welcomes-designation-of-temporary-protected-status-for-eligible-venezuelan-nationals-in-the-u-s>.

²¹ Alexandre de Santi and Rafael Moro Martins, "In Sharp Rebuke, Brazil Supreme Court Rules Judge Who Locked Up Lula Was Biased," *The Intercept*, March 15, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/03/15/brazil-lula-sergio-moro-supreme-court/>.

²² Nick Paton Walsh, Jo Shelley, Eduardo Duwe and William Bonnett, "Bolsonaro Calls Coronavirus a 'Little Flu.' Inside Brazil's Hospitals, Doctors Know the Horrifying Reality," *CNN*, May 25, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/23/americas/brazil-coronavirus-hospitals-intl/index.html>.

²³ Robert Muggah, "Bolsonaro Is Following Trump's Anti-Democracy Playbook," *Foreign Policy*, January 14, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/14/bolsonaro-brazil-trump-anti-democracy-elections/>.

²⁴ Julie Turkewitz, "M.I.T. Researchers Cast Doubt on Bolivian Election Fraud," *New York Times*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/28/world/americas/bolivia-election-fraud.html>.

²⁵ Lucien Chauvin and Anthony Faiola, "As the U.S.-backed Government in Bolivia Unleashes a Wave of Political Persecution, the Trump Administration Remains Silent," *Washington Post*, March 6, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/as-the-us-backed-government-in-bolivia-unleashes-what-many-see-as-political-persecutions-the-trump-administration-remains-silent/2020/03/06/542b828c-5751-11ea-8efd-0f904bdd8057_story.html.

Carone argued that the socialist government of Evo Morales had caused a rift in U.S.-Bolivian relations in an “unnatural way.”²⁶ A return to the state of nature in which Latin American governments could be counted on to be trusted U.S. allies was, therefore, in order.

In Honduras, in contrast, where the OAS also argued that there was rampant electoral fraud during the 2017 reelection of the right-wing president Juan Orlando Hernández—and where there was election-related protest and upheaval similar to that in Bolivia—the Trump administration quickly recognized Hernández as the winner, ignoring the calls of the OAS and members of U.S. Congress for a new election.²⁷ An admirer of the U.S. president, Hernández supported Trump’s decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and Honduras was one of just nine countries (together with Guatemala, led by evangelical Christian Jimmy Morales) that voted with the United States against a UN resolution condemning the move.²⁸ The suggestion of quid pro quo was unavoidable: just one day after voting with Trump at the UN, the administration officially congratulated Hernández on his election win, recognizing him as Honduras’s legitimate leader.²⁹

Later, Hernández signed an agreement that was intended to stem the flow of migrants through and from his country, allowing the United States to deport even non-Honduran arrivals to Honduras and requiring those seeking asylum to do so from Honduras, rather than at the U.S. border. (Similar agreements were negotiated with right-wing president Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and Morales in Guatemala).³⁰ Though Hernández had *already* been identified as the unindicted co-conspirator in the U.S. federal trial of his brother, Tony, on drug trafficking charges, Trump administration support never wavered—even after court documents alleged that Hernández said he would make U.S. officials think he was cooperating in the drug war but actually “shove the drugs right up the noses of the gringos.”³¹ Trump’s friendly relations with Honduras therefore followed a long U.S. government tradition in Central America and elsewhere of subordinating concerns about democracy or drugs to concerns about immigration and socialism.³²

The Honduras case makes clear that while restoring U.S. supremacy and backing right-wing forces in the region were key themes, the most consistent through line of Trump policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean was its stance on immigration. Trump’s fear that residents of so-called “shithole” countries were immigrating in large numbers to the United States put the spotlight on Haiti in particular. Some Haitian-Americans who harbored antipathy toward the Clintons for their bungled aid programs in post-earthquake Haiti had initially supported Trump against Hillary Clinton, a fact that he played up in his first campaign, promising to be a “champion” for

²⁶ “Bolivia Pressures Argentina over Morales Call for ‘Armed Militias,’” *Reuters*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bolivia-politics/bolivia-pressures-argentina-over-morales-call-for-armed-militias-idUSKBN1ZE2FA>.

²⁷ Sarah Kinoshian, “US Recognizes Re-election of Honduras President Despite Fraud Allegations,” *The Guardian*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/22/us-recognizes-re-election-of-honduras-president-despite-calls-for-a-new-vote>.

²⁸ Joshua Partlow, “Guatemala and Honduras sided with Trump on Jerusalem. Here’s Why,” *Washington Post*, December 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/guatemala-and-honduras-sided-with-trump-on-jerusalem-heres-why/2017/12/28/7c4dfcee-cb1e-11e7-956e-baca358f9725_story.html;

²⁹ Statement by Heather Nauert, Spokesperson, on the Presidential Elections in Honduras, December 22, 2017, <https://hn.usembassy.gov/statement-heather-nauert-spokesperson-presidential-elections-honduras>.

³⁰ Nicole Naurea, “Trump’s Agreements in Central America are Dismantling the Asylum System as We Know It,” *Vox*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/9/26/20870768/trump-agreement-honduras-guatemala-el-salvador-explained>.

³¹ Emily Palmer and Kirk Semple, “A Damning Portrait of Presidential Corruption, but Hondurans Sound Resigned,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/23/world/americas/honduras-juan-orlando-hernandez-drug-trial.html>; “US Prosecutors Accuse Honduran President of Drug Conspiracy,” *Associated Press*, August 3, 2019, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/florida/articles/2019-08-03/honduran-president-accused-in-ny-of-drug-conspiracy>; Kate Linthicum, “The President of Honduras was Supposed to be a Drug War Ally. U.S. Prosecutors Say He Helped Move Cocaine,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-01-09/us-legal-move-expands-drug-claims-against-honduras-president>.

³² Alexander Aviña, “A History of Inconvenient Allies and Convenient Enemies,” *NACLA*, April 30, 2020, <https://nacla.org/news/2020/04/30/narco-state-allies>.

Haitians.³³ But when Trump moved to end TPS for Haitians in his first year in office, hundreds of Haitian and Haitian-American protestors descended on Mar-a-Lago to denounce the president, and they returned after his “shithole” remarks became public.³⁴ Trump clearly knew little about Haiti, and cared even less; as his comments desirous of immigrants from “Norway” made clear, he approached the country only through a lens of racist xenophobia. Trump therefore not only demonstrated the selective forgetting of the long history of U.S. military and electoral interventions in Haiti, he also signaled to his followers a return to a revanchist U.S. tradition of xenophobia, a tradition at least as old as Chinese exclusion and debates around the imperial subsumption of non-white Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Filipinos in the late nineteenth century.

Forgetting also defined Trump’s racialized antipathy toward the tens of thousands of Central Americans, many of them children, who arrived seeking asylum at the U.S.–Mexico border during his term. As the Trump administration developed increasingly elaborate justifications for defying international asylum law—eventually using the emergency of COVID-19 to effectively close the border to asylees altogether through the newly enacted Title 42, even when the virus was more rampant north of the Rio Grande than south—the long history of U.S. destabilization in the region remained unacknowledged. U.S. support for right-wing dictatorial regimes in the region during the 1950s and 1960s; the U.S. backed-overthrow of the Guatemalan government in 1954; support for counterinsurgency and paramilitary forces during the 1980s; the fostering of drug-trafficking by U.S. allies in the same period; the deportation of youth involved in gangs like the MS-13 from U.S. prisons during the 1990s; the massive illegal traffic in U.S. guns to Mexico and Central America; the U.S. failure to address the uneven ravages of climate change; and U.S. intervention in political processes as recent as the 2009 ouster of Honduras’ left-leaning president Manuel Zelaya—these were histories that directly created the conditions from which hundreds of thousands of Central Americans were forced to flee. But they were histories overlooked and erased as Trump rallied his base to build the “big beautiful wall.” If this was perhaps the most egregious example of Trump’s selective forgetting, however, the question of what might change under Biden administration, with its “do not come” message, remains an open one.³⁵

While the wall was itself a kind of fetish of the Trump presidency—a physical object imbued with fantastical powers—border enforcement in fact went well beyond the barrier. In this, Trump was only continuing the policies of his predecessor, Obama, who worked with Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto to fortify Mexico’s southern border with Guatemala in an attempt to stop Central Americans from transiting Mexico in the first place. An Obama immigration official had declared in 2012 that “the Guatemalan border with Chiapas is now our southern border,” and Trump continued this policy, putting pressure first on Peña Nieto and then on his successor Andres Manuel López Obrador to further harden the crossing.³⁶ In fact, during this period, Mexico deported far more Central American migrants than the United States did, putting the Mexican state in the service of U.S. immigration goals.³⁷ Though López Obrador, known widely as AMLO, promised during his campaign he would promote dignity for migrants and seek an end to this policy, he has not only overseen the continued militarization the southern border with his newly formed National Guard, but he also agreed to the so-called Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) known popularly as the Remain-in-Mexico program, which kept asylum seekers from crossing into the United States (a program that was formally ended by the Biden administration in June). While many anti-populist opponents of both Trump and AMLO chalked up Mexican acquiescence to the program to personal affinities between the two leaders,

³³ Jude Sheerin, “US election 2016: What Really Happened with the Clintons in Haiti?,” *BBC News*, November 2, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37826098>; Jonathan Katz, “The Clintons’ Haiti Screw-Up, As Told By Hillary’s Emails,” *Politico*, September 2, 2015.

³⁴ “TPS Protesters March On Mar-a-Lago,” WLRN, November 21, 2017, <https://www.wlrn.org/news/2017-11-21/tps-protesters-march-on-mar-a-lago>.

³⁵ Pedro Gerson, “Kamala Harris’ ‘Do Not Come’ Message Was a Political Failure,” *Slate*, June 10, 2021, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/06/kamala-harris-immigration-guatemala.html>

³⁶ Jeff Abbot, “Keep Out! How the U.S. Is Militarizing Mexico’s Southern Border,” *The Progressive*, October 2, 2017, <https://progressive.org/magazine/keep-out-how-the-us-militarizes-mexico-southern-border>.

³⁷ David Bier, “Mexico Deported More Central Americans Than the U.S. in 2018,” Cato Institute, June 12, 2019, <https://www.cato.org/blog/mexico-deported-more-central-americans-us-did-2018>.

calmer analysts have recognized both the pragmatic tradition in Mexican foreign policy, and, perhaps more importantly, the structural constraints under which Mexican leaders operate, particularly when it comes to the economy.³⁸

The negotiations over MPP underscore the emphasis on trade and economic integration in Trump's policy toward Mexico, and their links to the immigration question. Given his penchant for personalist deal-making, Trump often used the presidential authority over tariffs as a cudgel in his foreign policy. To bolster his own negotiating image, Trump made loud threats to institute escalating tariffs on Mexico if migrant numbers weren't contained—though the deal had already largely been concluded months before Trump's announcement and then his retraction of the tariff threat.³⁹ Nevertheless, such a threat was in keeping with his repeated assertions that trade with Mexico under NAFTA been a boon for Mexico and a curse for the United States, a claim that wholly ignored the distributional consequences in both countries in order to stoke a nationalist furor.⁴⁰ Mexico was "killing us on jobs and trade," Trump argued, and therefore NAFTA had to be scrapped.⁴¹ His negotiation of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) as a 'new NAFTA' therefore fulfilled a key campaign promise, particularly with provisions to raise wages and labor standards in Mexico, theoretically making outsourcing less attractive. It remains to be seen, however, what effects the USMCA might have on U.S. manufacturing and agricultural employment; even companies with which Trump personally intervened continued to automate and offshore manufacturing jobs.⁴²

If little actually changed with regard to licit trade between the United States and Mexico in the Trump era, however, the question of illicit trade, particularly in narcotic drugs, saw a somewhat surprising shift under López Obrador—though largely in reaction to bungled U.S. actions. While Trump initially insisted that his administration would embark on a new strategy with regard to drugs, particularly in the context of the overdose crisis in the United States, the administration largely continued the failed punitive drug-war policies of his predecessors over the previous five decades.⁴³ But in his insistence on the unquestioned U.S. prerogative to fight drug trafficking, Trump overplayed his hand with regard to longstanding security cooperation agreements with Mexico. After a brutal attack on a family of dual-citizens in northern Mexico in 2019, Trump tweeted that he would send U.S. forces to "wage WAR," on drug-trafficking organizations; AMLO politely but firmly rejected the suggestion as an affront to Mexican sovereignty.⁴⁴

Later, however, when the United States arrested a high-ranking Mexican military official, General Salvador Cienfuegos, on drug-trafficking charges without the knowledge of the Mexican state—revealing U.S. investigations to which the notoriously corrupt and compromised Mexican security forces weren't privy—AMLO responded by scaling back security cooperation with the United States for the first time in decades. Mexico insisted, under threat of kicking the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) out of the country, that the United States return Cienfuegos to Mexico. Once the general was transferred from U.S. custody, AMLO immediately oversaw the

³⁸ Pamela Starr, "What AMLO Really Thinks About Biden," *Foreign Policy*, February 2, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/02/what-amlo-really-thinks-about-biden>.

³⁹ Michael Shear and Maggie Haberman, "Mexico Agreed to Take Border Actions Months Before Trump Announced Tariff Deal," *New York Times*, June 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/08/us/politics/trump-mexico-deal-tariffs.html>.

⁴⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, "Backgrounder: NAFTA and the USMCA: Weighing the Impact of North American Trade," July 1, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/naftas-economic-impact>.

⁴¹ Robert Valencia, "Trump Should Worry About U.S. Unskilled Labor And Stop Blaming Mexico for Job Losses, Official Says," *Newsweek*, December 10, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/trumps-economic-policies-hurt-us-more-mexican-labor-official-says-741868>.

⁴² David Lynch, "Trump's Carrier Deal Fades as Economic Reality Intervenes," *Washington Post*, October 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/10/26/trump-carrier-manufacturing-jobs/>.

⁴³ Dina Fine Maron, "Is Trump's Opioid Strategy a 'War on Drugs' Relapse?," *Scientific American*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-trumps-opioid-strategy-a-war-on-drugs-relapse>.

⁴⁴ Mary Beth Sheridan and Brittany Shammass, "Nine Members of Mormon Family, Dual U.S.-Mexican Citizens, Killed in Attack in Northern Mexico; Trump Offers Support," *Washington Post*, November 5, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/at-least-seven-members-of-mormon-family-brutally-killed-in-northern-mexico/2019/11/05/d303e448-ffbb-11e9-9518-1e76abc088b6_story.html.

passage of a new bill to limit cooperation and curtail the privileges of U.S. security forces.⁴⁵ Mexico subsequently declined to prosecute the general, much to the dismay of U.S. prosecutors. By insisting on a return to an imagined past where U.S. drug war dictates were unquestioned, the Trump administration may have actually constrained the U.S. prerogative in Mexico on the question of drugs. If the result is a rethinking of the longstanding militarized kingpin strategy in Mexico—a failure in every regard—perhaps some good will come from Trump’s blunders, but this remains to be seen.

A more enduring legacy of Trump’s approach to Mexico, however, is likely to come from his constant invocations of Mexicans as “bad hombres.”⁴⁶ Repeating a trope that has reared its head repeatedly over the decades, Trump continuously insisted that Mexicans brought drugs and crime across the border, thereby corrupting a once great United States—and insisted on a return to an imagined period before a white body politic was tainted with racialized others. The seething xenophobia that this formulation fostered among Trump supporters mobilized an imagined history through a kind of fun-house mirror: an entirely distorted past which Mexico was the aggressor, and the United States, the victim. The grievance politics that emerged from this combination of nostalgic return and selective forgetting underlines the incoherence of the Make America Great Again project, in which the United States was simultaneously the most powerful and important country in the world and yet also the victim of the predations of those who were presumed to be inferior and external. As was revealed in that Walmart parking lot in El Paso in 2019, such a worldview is deeply dangerous, and the destabilization it fostered under Trump will be with us for some time to come.

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⁴⁵ Mary Beth Sheridan, “Mexico Fast-Tracks Law that Could Limit Anti-Drug Cooperation with U.S.,” *Washington Post*, December 11, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexico-fast-tracks-law-that-could-limit-antidrug-cooperation-with-us/2020/12/11/aa2f90d4-3b43-11eb-98c4-25dc9f4987e8_story.html.

⁴⁶ Ben Zimmer, “Why Trump Uses Mock Spanish,” *The Atlantic*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/06/loco-hombres-why-trump-uses-mock-spanish/591733>.