

A Glimmer of Hope

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A man races his bicycle along the narrow highway from Ciudad Juárez to tiny Palomas, among the huge trucks. I give him water, a ginger ale which he gulps down, a bag of almonds but don't tell him he still has fifty miles to go.

His name is Carlos, he's from Venezuela and he thinks it will be easier to cross at Palomas.

At the Tierra del Oro shelter in El Modelo south of Palomas, a family from Michoacán, Mexico has been waiting a year for an asylum appointment.

Leonel and his family are from Guanajuato, Mexico and have been in the Punto Beta shelter in Palomas for two months waiting for their asylum interview. They fled Guanajuato because of the violence there. Now they will have to return to it?

Two young men, one from Guatemala and the other Mexico go to the nearby Gonzalez grocery store and help us load our car with chicken, eggs, beans and rice for the Respetrans shelter in Juárez where sixty people, mostly women with children had been applying for an asylum interview through the now-discontinued CBP 1 phone app.

Is there any hope that the ban on asylum seekers will be lifted?

To me, the key issue is those who have been crossing the border illegally. As Thomas Friedman, the noted journalist has said, “ We need a high wall with a big gate on the southern border.” He is right. We Americans are the ones who have to decide who enters our country and under what circumstances.

Believe it or not, we now have that “high wall.” It started with the Biden administration’s negotiations with Mexico’s former president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and Amlo’s agreement to tighten Mexico’s southern border and restrict the number of migrants headed north to the US. Then there was Biden’s executive order further restricting asylum. Then the continuing Border Patrol security improvements like the construction of autonomous surveillance towers and repairs to the wall in places like the area between Anapra, Mexico and the Santa Teresa port of entry.

In addition, there were more deportations in Biden’s last year than any of the four years of Trump’s first term.

At a meeting with Border Patrol (BP) agents on February 5, they described further security improvements, the termination of the catch and release policy, for example. Here’s how that worked.

On February 23, 2024, I observed BP agent Hector Covarrubias detain two women from Torreón, Mexico. Suddenly he said in Spanish, “I know you two. I detained you yesterday.” Under the catch and release policy that was in effect then, he just released them to Mexico after that first encounter. In other words, they got one “free shot” at entering the US

illegally. That policy has been discontinued and the word is out that the first detention will now result in severe penalties. That has caused a further decrease in the numbers attempting to cross.

Now we also have Mexican soldiers arriving at the border. They were not effective when they were last posted in places like the wall between Anapra, Mexico and Sunland Park, New Mexico but this might be different. We have additional American soldiers going there. And, most important, surely legislation will be reintroduced to provide funds for much-needed additional BP agents. There was a huge hiring effort almost twenty years ago and many agents will soon be reaching retirement age.

More BP agents are the key, much more so than either Mexican or American soldiers.

Given these dramatic improvements in border security, can't we argue that we now have the "high wall?" Couldn't we say that now is the time to refocus on those who are coming to our border legally to claim asylum? Why doesn't the Congress get moving and provide funds for more judges to adjudicate asylum claims quickly? One of the BP agents said to us that it was inhumane that they should have to wait so long for a hearing.

On January 31, when I crossed the border at Santa Teresa, two US agents stopped me and asked if I had weapons in my car. I've crossed there hundreds of times and this has never come up before. If it's a new policy, it's a good one because it's weapons illegally transported from the US that have made Mexico's cartels so powerful.

With our low birth rate, our need for workers in areas like agriculture and construction, and the positive aspects of migration like tax payments and low rates of criminal activity, it's

time to claim that we have Friedman's "high wall" and refocus on those who want to come to our country legally via a reopened asylum system. I've just read, however, that twenty immigration judges have just been fired. Firing judges when we have a shortage and tens of thousands of asylum seekers are waiting years for hearings? It looks like I have been too optimistic.

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