

Trump's chief of staff mocks young immigrants as "afraid" and "lazy" as DACA deadline approaches

By Eric London
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The anti-immigrant charade playing out in Washington on the eve of the February 8 deadline for a federal budget deal gives a sense of the xenophobic climate that will follow from whatever right-wing agreement the two parties reach on immigration.

After a meeting with Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell yesterday, Trump's Chief of Staff John Kelly denounced 1.1 million immigrant youth who did not sign up for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), calling them "too afraid" or "too lazy to get off their asses."

Kelly made these statements after denouncing the DACA program, which covers roughly 800,000 of the 1.9 million undocumented young people brought to the United States in their childhoods, calling it "unconstitutional." Trump would not extend the program beyond the March 5 deadline, at which point recipients will face deportation, Kelly said.

This deadline is fast approaching, and President Trump indicated yesterday that he was willing to provoke a shutdown to secure far right-wing anti-immigration proposals in any appropriations deal. "I'd love to see a shutdown if we can't get this stuff taken care of," Trump said at a roundtable meeting highlight the dangers of the Salvadoran gang MS-13 in an attempt to portray immigrants as criminals.

If "we don't have a wall, we're never going to solve this problem," he said yesterday, referring to MS-13. "I would shut it down over this issue. If we don't straighten out our border, we don't have a country."

Employing a term usually reserved for the subject of fishing, Trump said, "They just come in so far, so easy. And then you have catch and release. You catch people, you have to release them right away" for court

proceedings, he complained. In fact, the journey across the US-Mexico border isn't "so easy." Up to 27,000 immigrants have died in the desert border region over the last twenty years.

One concrete change emerged from yesterday's roundtable meeting: Trump established the "National Vetting Center," which the White House says will "better identify individuals seeking to enter the country who present a threat to national security, border security, homeland security, or public safety." Marrying the language of the bipartisan war on terror with the anti-immigration drive, this new branch of the national security apparatus will certainly block untold thousands of immigrants escaping violence and poverty from entering the US.

These programs are increasingly justified by calling attention to MS-13, a deadly drug gang that has become the central bogeyman in the anti-immigrant crackdown. Founded in the jails of Los Angeles, thousands of US deportees found fertile soil trafficking drugs to America through the impoverished Central American country, ravished by decades of US-backed dictators and death squads.

In his state of the union speech last month, Trump highlighted a murder committed by MS-13 gang members who "took advantage of glaring loopholes in our laws to enter the country as illegal, unaccompanied minors."

The attack on unaccompanied minors—i.e., children who cross the border without their parents—marks a new low in the bipartisan attack on immigrants. At yesterday's roundtable discussion, Republican Congressman Peter King called for "in-depth vetting" not only of unaccompanied minors, but of their host

families—often distant relatives of the youth, their only connection in the US.

“A disproportionate number of the MS-13 members are unaccompanied minors,” King said. Barack Obama jailed tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors, many in for-profit prisons, who attempted to cross the border during the 2014 surge of violence in Central America.

More recently, in 2017, the Trump administration called national attention to a violent rape of a 14-year-old girl allegedly committed in a high school bathroom by two undocumented youth—18-year-old Henry Sanchez and 17-year-old Jose Montano. Assistant State’s Attorney Mary Herdman said at the time, “We have been shown some photos of both of the defendants’ phones of them flashing MS gang signs.” The government held the youths without bail and arrested one of their fathers for deportation as retribution.

Press Secretary Sean Spicer announced in a nationally televised press conference last May, “It’s horrendous and horrible and disgusting what this young woman in Rockville [Maryland] went through.” He said Trump’s mass deportation plan was a priority “because of tragedies like this” and that “immigration pays its toll on our people.”

As it turned out, both boys were completely innocent. Charges were dropped when surveillance cameras showed that the girl had lied about the boys’ activity. But the damage was done—a *Breitbart*-backed campaign ensured a wave of anti-immigrant threats in the Virginia area where the rape allegations surfaced.

Beyond a series of pro-forma tweets, the Democratic Party has not lifted a finger to criticize Trump’s racist statements. The only reason why DACA beneficiaries still do not have protection as the March 5 deadline approaches is because the Democrats ended the stunt shutdown in January without securing any gains. Since the shutdown, the Democratic Party has spent its entire political capital denouncing the Republicans for questioning the Democrats’ attempt to bill Trump as a dupe of Russia.

Speaking yesterday, Democratic Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer had no response to Trump’s anti-immigrant ravings, saying only Trump’s threat to shut down the government “speaks for itself.” Earlier in the day, Schumer told the press that “We are closer

to an agreement than we have ever been,” referring to a Republican proposal that would drastically increase military spending but may face a presidential veto.

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