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Why Immigration Agents Don’t Quit in Protest

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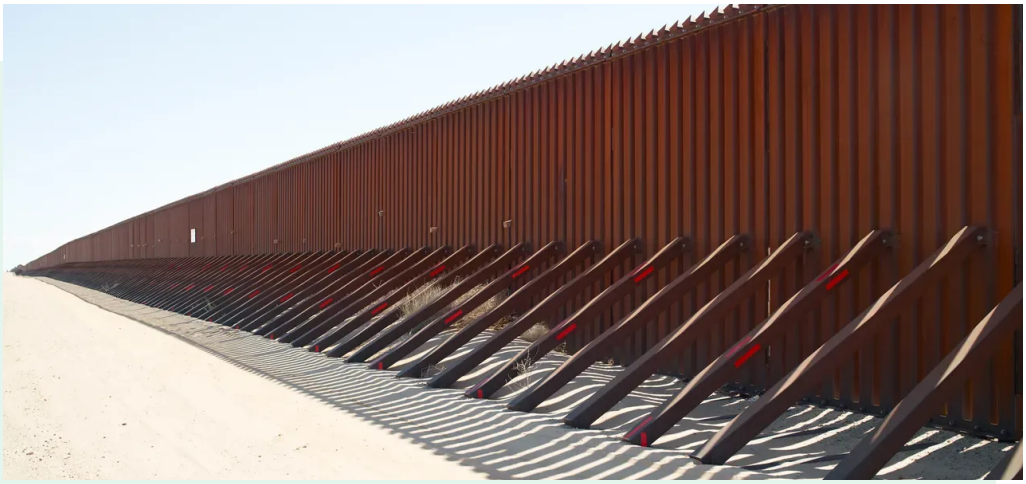


Image: The New Yorker

In the winter of 2018, Joshua Childress was sent to the Yuma Regional Medical Center, in southwest Arizona, to guard a man who’d fallen from a thirty-foot-high border wall. Childress was in his seventh year in the United States Border Patrol and had grown accustomed to doing hospital watch, in which agents monitor recently apprehended migrants to insure that they don’t escape while receiving care. To Childress’s surprise, the injured man spoke fluent English. Childress asked why he had come to the U.S. “Because this is my home,” the man replied.

The man, who appeared to be in his early twenties, had lived in Arizona since he was eight years old-longer than Childress had been in the state himself. A few months earlier, the man had hosted a barbecue at his house, and neighbors had called in a noise complaint. The police came, asked for the man’s I.D., and reported him to immigration authorities, who deported him to Mexico. Childress asked why the man hadn’t sought Dreamer status under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which provides protection from deportation for certain undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children. The man explained that he had wanted to, but his father had been afraid that the paperwork was a trick meant to entrap them.

Childress listened as the man described the mountain town where

WORD NOTES

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helicopter
n. an aircraft lifted by spinning blades above it

humanity
n. all human beings

cosmic
adj. related to space or the universe

conducted
v. carried out or organised

deployment
n. putting equipment or people in position for use

analyze
v. to study something carefully to understand it

maintenance
n. work done to keep something in good condition

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he’d grown up, a place that sounded much like the community where Childress was raised, in rural Colorado. “I barely speak Spanish,” the man told Childress. “I don’t know anybody in Mexico. I’ve been down there wandering around for three months, trying to figure out what to do, and I decided, You know what? I’ll take my chances and come back here. And then I fell from the fence and broke my leg.”

The doctor arrived and announced that the man had suffered a complete fracture and recommended that he seek surgery as soon as he was back in Mexico. If the injury went untreated, the doctor warned, it could lead to sepsis. For now, he said, the man would be fitted with a temporary cast and returned to Border Patrol custody.

Like all agents, Childress had come face to face with countless migrants; he was familiar with their struggles. But he was adept at pushing aside stories of misfortune to focus instead on the border crossers who had serious criminal histories-the arrests he felt good about. Increasingly, however, Childress had begun to question whether the vast majority of the migrants he encountered, most of whom had come to the country to change tires or pick lettuce or work in construction, really posed a threat. Once, a man at the Yuma processing center had removed his shirt to show Childress marks on his back, where he had been whipped by smugglers after he refused to carry a bundle of drugs across the border. The lashes, it occurred to Childress later, were “Christlike.”

As Childress transported the man with the broken leg to the Border Patrol station, it struck him that he was about to send someone many people would consider a “model immigrant” to potential doom. Nevertheless, he off-loaded the man in the station’s gated sally port and handed him over to a colleague to be processed for deportation, just as he had done countless times before. This, after all, was the job.

I first heard of Childress in the fall of 2018, when reading an article that he wrote for the Daily Beast titled “Why I Quit the Border Patrol.” “I ultimately realized that I was putting people in cages for non-violent offenses, something I opposed in every other area of the law,” he wrote. “I was impeding the movement of people when I wanted to be able to move freely around the world. I was enforcing the rules of a game I had won simply by being born on the right side of a line.”

Reading Childress’s account was like looking in a rearview mirror. I had quit the Border Patrol for similar reasons in 2012, after nearly four years as an agent, and had spent the next phase of my life trying to make sense of my participation in the militarized violence of immigration enforcement, working as a barista and a bartender while attending school to become a writer and a teacher. Childress’s departure from

WORD NOTES

52 terms

mechanisms
n. ways things work; sets of connected moving parts

complex
adj. made of many connected parts; difficult to understand

reduce
v. to make something smaller or less

increase
v. to become or make greater in amount

surge
v. to increase suddenly and strongly

implement
v. to put a plan or decision into action

enforce
v. to make people obey a law or rule

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the Border Patrol came shortly after the implementation of Donald Trump’s “zero-tolerance policy,” under which parents were separated from their children at the border, sparking a national uproar. At the time, it was possible to believe that agents’ understanding of their work might be changing.

That summer, more than a dozen Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents signed a letter to the Secretary of Homeland Security, Kirstjen Nielsen, calling for the agency to be disbanded. In July of 2019, Jenn Budd, who had resigned from the Border Patrol nearly two decades earlier, wrote an “Open Letter from an Ex-Border Patrol Agent,” calling on current agents to demand change or quit in protest of the immoral orders that they were being asked to carry out. The following year, Wesley Farris, a high-ranking member of the Border Patrol’s notoriously hard-line union, spoke out against the zero-tolerance policy, telling PBS’s “Frontline” that separating children from their parents “was the most horrible thing I’ve ever done.” But remarkably few agents followed in Childress’s footsteps; Farris, for example, refused to participate in separations but did not quit, asking his supervisor to assign him elsewhere instead.

Much of the outcry stirred by the harsh policies of the first Trump Administration was quelled by Joe Biden’s promise of a more measured approach. His Presidency saw a record increase in migrant encounters at the border, a fact that is often attributed to lax enforcement. In fact, the Biden Administration left several of Trump’s restrictionist policies in place, and detentions at the border increased twelvefold while total removals tripled. Still, there was a feeling among immigration agents that they were being shackled by the new Administration. By 2024, the Border Patrol had lost a quarter of its workforce, with many longtime agents opting for early retirement. They often blamed the President. “Under Biden, things are the worst they have ever been by far,” one agent told the Washington Examiner , adding, “Agents are afraid of ending up on the news for doing their job or getting in trouble for doing their job. There is no morale.”

With Trump back in the White House, many agents now regard the Administration as once again on their side. But the demands of meeting its overarching goal-deporting a million people a year, per Trump’s top domestic-policy adviser, Stephen Miller-have led to a new form of strain. In 2025, The Atlantic reported that ICE ’s workforce “has never been so miserable.” Employees have become burned out and morally conflicted as their focus has shifted from pursuing drug smugglers and human traffickers to apprehending asylum seekers in courthouses and arresting day laborers at their worksites. Another agent said that he was contemplating quitting

WORD NOTES

52 terms

develop
v. to grow, improve or create something

promote
v. to help something develop or become known

prevent
v. to stop something from happening

protect
v. to keep something safe from harm

impact
n. a strong effect; a collision

factor
n. something that helps cause a result

cause
n. the reason something happens

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rather than continuing to spend his days “arresting gardeners.”

In early 2026, after the murders of Renee Good and Alex Pretti during Operation Metro Surge, in Minneapolis, the journalist Ken Klippenstein reported that many immigration agents were “getting seriously paranoid” about the public backlash to the shootings. The operation was so unpopular with the rank and file that Border Patrol and ICE struggled to find personnel for the deployment. By July, morale among immigration officers had dipped below its nadir during the Biden Administration, with agents now complaining of being overextended, inundated with novice recruits, and undermined by inflammatory rhetoric from on high. Agents said that they had previously found motivation in their jobs by “being able to stop bad people and narcotics from coming in,” and expressed frustration that the Administration’s political posturing was distracting from their duty to “protect the public” and to focus on “the very worst of the worst.”

The sociologist Irene Vega, in her 2025 book “Bordering on Indifference,” draws on a series of interviews with Border Patrol and ICE agents to analyze the “moral economy” of the immigration-enforcement workforce. From the moment agents arrive at the federal law-enforcement academy, she writes, they “are trained and socialized as police officers, and taught that their raison d’être is to protect America by preventing the entrance and executing the removal of noncitizens deemed unwanted by the state.” The inherently bureaucratic nature of enforcing immigration law has always been at odds with the paramilitary image that is sold to most recruits. Agents prepare for violent criminal encounters and cultivate a “warrior mentality” despite the fact that they are most often, as Vega writes, “at war with an enemy that does not fight back.”

Many agents who have quit for moral reasons cite this tension. In a 2019 article for The American Scholar , Brendan Lenihan, a former Border Patrol agent, wrote, “The federal government taught me how to shoot an assault rifle from a moving vehicle and how to fast-rope from a hovering helicopter, but never did anyone explain how to go home at the end of a shift and forget about the migrants I’d apprehended and their stories.” As with Childress, the accumulation of nonthreatening encounters eventually made his job untenable. “I left the Border Patrol because I was exhausted by the tragic stories,” he wrote, “and because the more I saw, the less affected I was by events that had once seemed shocking.”

“Rock, banana leaf, teeth.”

Cartoon by Julia Suits

How is it, then, that so few agents seem to arrive at this moral breaking point? Nearly two-thirds of

WORD NOTES

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approach
n. a way of dealing with something

process
n. a series of actions or changes

policy
n. a set of plans or rules guiding decisions

legislation
n. laws or the process of making laws

law
n. a rule made by a government

congress
n. a national law-making body, especially in the US

president
n. the head of a country, organisation or university

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Americans disapprove of the Trump Administration’s immigration crackdown. It has become customary for agents to mask their faces from public view-D.H.S. maintains that this is to prevent doxing, but it is also emblematic of a growing perception of this work as shameful. In off-duty social situations, agents often obscure what they do to avoid awkwardness and scorn, even hiding the nature of their employment on dating apps. “We can’t always support what happens just because it’s one of us,” a Border Patrol agent had told a private group chat in the wake of Pretti’s killing. And yet, even as their work has grown increasingly cruel, there has been no exodus of agents who reject it.

Last spring, I began reaching out to my former co-workers to hear about their recent experiences in the job. The first who agreed to speak with me, an agent who now works for ICE , suggested that we meet at a diner in Arizona. It had been years since we’d seen each other; in greeting, we clasped hands and embraced. Over coffee, we talked about our families, and he asked about my life as a university professor. Gradually, our conversation turned to our old colleagues. He caught me up on who was still in the Border Patrol, who had transferred to the Canadian border, and who, like him, had gone to work for ICE . Many of my former co-workers, I learned, had become fathers; others had succumbed to alcoholism. A few, he told me, had died by suicide.

Eventually, I asked about his work. As he saw it, morale was good, far better than under Biden-his office had more resources and had expanded with new hires, many of whom had backgrounds in law enforcement and were hard workers. There were caveats, of course. He did not like being sent to arrest people at courthouses during immigration and asylum hearings, which felt like a trick. He thought that it had been a bad idea to send border agents to Minneapolis, since they were accustomed to patrolling barren deserts, “where everybody is an illegal,” and not trained to police the population of an inner city. Something was bound to go wrong, he said.

But he quickly shrugged off any misgivings. The politicized nature of the work was unavoidable. He’d learned to take it in stride long ago. Often, when he was processing someone for removal, the person would sit across from him and begin to recount why they had come to the U.S. Maybe they had family here, maybe they even had kids. Everyone has a story, he said, but it was his job to tell them, “Look, I understand. But you can’t be here.”

In the weeks that followed, I connected with more former co-workers. One, a fellow-Latino whom I’d always known to be sensitive in his treatment of migrants, told me that he “agreed with the mission but not the tactics.” An agent who was still working at the southern border said that, in recent years, ICE agents

WORD NOTES

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authority
n. the power to make decisions; an official body

government
n. the group that runs a country or region

campaign
n. an organised series of activities to achieve a goal

community
n. people living in the same area or sharing something

public
n. ordinary people as a group

population
n. all the people living in an area

migration
n. the movement of people or animals to another place

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have become increasingly hostile toward the people they are arresting. “The growth in abuse of rank and authority has become so distorted that due process no longer exists,” he told me, adding that standards of agent accountability had reached new lows.

Despite their qualms, none of the agents I spoke to-many of whom were nearly eligible for retirement-disagreed with current policies strongly enough to leave. But one of them mentioned Aaron Veckey, a former agent who, in 2024, gave a series of interviews to the right-wing media personality James O’Keefe. While in the patrol, Veckey had raised concerns about detention conditions with his superiors, who repeatedly dismissed the issue. He filed a whistle-blower complaint with the U.S. Office of Special Counsel and soon received a cease-and-desist order for “reporting sensitive information outside of Border Patrol,” a charge he was cleared of after an internal investigation. With O’Keefe, he spoke of the “dogma of apathy” that prevailed among agents and compared the treatment of migrants at his station to the torture at Abu Ghraib.

As far as I know, Veckey, who was then less than a year from retirement, is the only non-anonymous active-duty agent to publicly blow the whistle on the agency’s inhumane treatment of migrants. Over the phone, he described images from the peak of asylum-seeker arrivals, in 2023 and 2024, that continued to haunt him. As many as six hundred migrants were detained outdoors without shade in his station’s parking lot and sally port, where temperatures reached a hundred and fifteen degrees in the summer and dipped below freezing in winter. He recalled a night when he found sixty migrants piled on top of one another for warmth. Another agent had shown him a photo of a half-dozen migrants jammed in a porta-potty to share body heat. Despite the freezing temperatures, agents confiscated the migrants’ coats and refused to give them blankets. Veckey remembered being ordered to remove jackets from breast-feeding mothers.

The conditions that Veckey described mirror those which have been reported at temporary ICE facilities during Trump’s second term. In Chicago, hundreds of migrants were held for three or more days in facilities not meant for overnight detention; at the Mesa airport, in Arizona, more than seven hundred people were crowded into a deportation staging facility with a maximum capacity of two hundred and three. In downtown Manhattan, as many as eighty-six people were crammed for three or more days at a time into a temporary holding room on the tenth floor of 26 Federal Plaza. It was one of four immigration-detention spaces at the courthouse, which are designed to hold no more than twenty-two people combined. The Washington Post called the room “a closet of

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immigrant
n. a person who moves to another country to live

border
n. a line separating countries or regions

military
adj. related to armed forces

security
n. protection from danger or threats

violence
n. physical force used to hurt people or damage things

police
n. the organisation responsible for keeping order and enforcing laws

justice
n. fair treatment; the system of law and courts

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humanity that smelled of sweat, urine and feces.”

“Not everyone felt the same way about how people were being treated,” Veckey told me. “But a lot of people did. A lot of agents looked around, like, ‘This is crazy. This is fucking horrifying.’ ” Others, however, were downright malicious. “There was a lot of petty abuse going on,” he said. “They were relishing treating these people like shit, throwing their phones away for no reason, not giving them water.” One day, while taking a family into custody near the border wall, Veckey watched a co-worker snatch a bowl of porridge from a mother who was shooing away a nearby street dog as she attempted to feed her infant. “That’s my fucking dog,” the agent sneered, taking the bowl from the woman and setting it down in front of the stray. Veckey’s heart sank. “I just wanted to throw up,” he told me. Finally, he intervened: “All I could muster up was ‘Nah bro, we ain’t doing that shit.’ ”

Veckey was also alarmed that other agents refused to stand alongside him after he filed his complaint. “Nobody would join me,” he told me. “The best Christian men I know at that station all had their excuses.” In his interview with O’Keefe, he said it was “one of the biggest pains in my career to know that so many good men are sitting on the sidelines on this.” For the better part of two years, he urged his co-workers to file their own reports, but none did. “I told all these guys, ‘Just call this lawyer. You can do it anonymously,’ ” Veckey told me. “But, nah, they won’t do it. They won’t do it. The guys just won’t fucking do it.”

The brutality of American immigration enforcement is nothing new. The U.S. Border Patrol was created with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, a piece of legislation championed by nativist politicians and self-professed eugenicists. The act, which imposed strict quotas on legal migration from Europe and banned migration from Asia altogether, exempted Mexico to appease U.S. agricultural interests and created the Border Patrol to police crossings and to insure that workers left the U.S. after the harvests. Early agents were often former enforcers of the Chinese Exclusion Act-“Chinese Inspectors” and “Mounted Guards”-and ex-Texas Rangers, who’d become notorious during the previous decade for terrorizing borderland Mexicans in a lynching campaign known as La Matanza. Many, too, were active members of the Ku Klux Klan.

According to the historian Greg Grandin, the Border Patrol in its earliest years was a “cult of brutality” that transformed the act of border crossing into “a ritual of abuse.” Migrants were required to pay entrance fees, take literacy tests, and submit to delousing protocols, which meant stripping naked and being doused with kerosene, gasoline, or DDT. Their clothes and other belongings were fumigated with Zyklon B, a

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rights
n. freedoms or protections that people are entitled to

income
n. money received from work or other sources

salary
n. a fixed regular payment for work

employment
n. paid work; the state of having a job

workforce
n. all the people available for or doing work

economy
n. the system of producing, selling and using goods and services

growth
n. an increase in size or amount

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cyanide-based pesticide later used in Nazi gas chambers.

Five years after the creation of the Border Patrol, Senator Coleman Blease, an outspoken proponent of segregation and lynching, successfully led an effort to pass the Undesirable Aliens Act of 1929, which made crossing the border without authorization a criminal offense. By 1954, the agency was large enough to launch Operation Wetback, a mass-deportation campaign set in motion by the Eisenhower Administration that mobilized what the Los Angeles Times described as “an army of border patrolmen complete with jeeps, trucks and seven aircraft” in an “all-out war to hurl tens of thousands of Mexican wetbacks into Mexico.”

The operation, now understood to be the largest such effort in U.S. history, has been enthusiastically invoked by President Trump. The methods of removal were indisputably harrowing. Deportees were placed in concentration camps and packed onto buses, trains, planes, and cargo boats for transport to the interior of Mexico, enduring conditions subsequently described in reports to Congress as akin to those aboard an “eighteenth-century slave ship.” One roundup, conducted in hundred-and-twelve-degree heat, resulted in eighty-eight deaths.

In the 1983 book “The Tarnished Door,” the investigative reporter John Crewdson detailed a litany of abusive tactics employed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the predecessor of ICE and C.B.P., including handcuffing migrants to moving cars, stealing their valuables, extorting them for sex and money, and pushing them off cliffs and then disguising their deaths as accidents. Crewdson described the agency as “shot through with nepotism, incompetence, corruption, and brutality” and recounted incidents of “men with drawn guns knocking on bedroom windows, shining flashlights on couples in bed, climbing in windows and barging through doors without permission, and taking occupants (usually aliens, sometimes citizens) away in various stages of undress.’’ Establishing total control of the border and immigration, he concluded, could never be achieved “short of the establishment of a police state.”

After 9/11, the war on terror wedded immigration enforcement to national security. The I.N.S. was dissolved, and its workforce was split across three agencies under the newly formed Department of Homeland Security: ICE , the Border Patrol, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Along with the bureaucratic reshuffling came a surge in funding and recruitment. Veterans of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, in particular, found post-deployment work in the new enforcement apparatus. In many cases, they were using the same military equipment and technology that they’d used in the

WORD NOTES

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trade

n. the buying and selling of goods and services

demand

n. the need or desire for a product or service

technology

n. the use of scientific knowledge to make useful tools and systems

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fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Ever since, the border-industrial complex has thrived on the narrative that immigration is dangerous and out of control. But agents themselves have balked at the characterization. In a 2018 op-ed for the Arizona Daily Star, Chris Montoya, a retired Border Patrol agent, pushed back against agency claims of having "the most frequently assaulted and most frequently injured" federal law-enforcement officers as "outlandish," citing data that U.S. marshals and personnel at the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Park Service faced more attacks. Border Patrol agents, he concluded, "enjoy one of the safest law enforcement jobs in America."

Montoya's article was published in response to the killing of José Antonio Elena Rodríguez, a Mexican sixteen-year-old who was shot ten times in the back by an agent who claimed that he feared for his life after rocks were thrown at him over the border wall. The agent in the case was eventually acquitted of charges of second-degree murder and manslaughter. D.H.S. officers remained largely silent about the incident. James Tomsheck, the former head of internal affairs for the Border Patrol, who was forced out of his job in 2014, alleged a culture of rampant impunity and corruption, saying that very few agents are willing to publicly voice complaints. There was, he said, "a clear understanding on the part of the rank and file in the Border Patrol that if they should engage in whistle-blower activities, or do anything to promote transparency, that they would be retaliated against in a way that would likely end their career."

Perhaps the most salient factor in this silence is agents' persistent belief that they are simply enforcing the law. "Conflating legality with morality is how agents can face the human suffering produced by immigration law and retain a sense of rightness," Irene Vega writes. Most of the agents she interviewed maintained that the laws they were enforcing were just, even if their interactions with vulnerable migrants often gave them pause. One agent confessed that, to bury her emotions, she would recite something like a personal mantra. "This is your job," she often told herself. "You're just doing what's legal."

Joshua Childress and I met on a bright spring morning in a Phoenix café not far from his home. The café was owned by Greek immigrants, he told me, and he'd heard about it at the Eastern Orthodox church where he worshipped and worked as a handyman. We ordered freddo espressos and soon began sharing stories of the low-level abuse and malfeasance we had witnessed in the patrol. Childress recalled how senior agents insinuated that trainees could mount searches and make arrests based on little more than a gut feeling, how a perceived aggression could be used to justify

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almost any use of force, and how the word of agents was almost always trusted over the testimony of the people they apprehended. “I knew things were messed up as I was doing them, as I was learning them,” Childress told me. “But I was justifying it. You learn during training how to word things so it doesn’t sound like you’re doing what you’re actually doing.”

The Border Patrol began implementing Trump’s zero-tolerance policy in May of 2018. “I kind of wish I had planted my flag at that point and said, ‘No, no more,’ ” Childress told me. But his wife had recently lost her job, and the couple had twin boys starting at a new school. They decided to delay his resignation, and he stayed on for several more months. Driving in and out of the parking lot each day, he noticed that many of his colleagues’ vehicles had Don’t tread on me bumper stickers. Childress recalled thinking, They don’t realize they’re the boot. In the end, he said, “it wasn’t so much that I changed my mind as I started to be honest with myself.”

When I asked Childress why he thought more agents didn’t quit, he quoted Upton Sinclair: “It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it.” Indeed, in many ways, there has never been a more lucrative time to be an immigration agent or a more costly time to quit. As part of Trump’s hiring push, new recruits enjoy up to fifty thousand dollars in signing bonuses on top of starting pay that ranges from sixty to ninety thousand dollars. Agents who stay on earn tens of thousands in retention bonuses, and those who rejoin after retirement can receive pension pay along with their salary. Most ICE and Border Patrol agents can expect to make about a hundred thousand dollars after just three years in the job, with many earning nearly two hundred thousand a year by the time they retire.

Especially in border regions, where the median household income is less than fifty thousand dollars, many Latinos see these jobs as one of the best routes to upward mobility. A former colleague confessed that he has long considered leaving and tried for years to lay the groundwork for an exit, even returning to school to earn a master’s degree. “I would have one hundred per cent bounced if I didn’t have a child,” he told me. Another agent I spoke to compared the job to “golden handcuffs.”

The day Childress finally mustered the courage to ask his superiors how to quit, he was met with bafflement. They had never heard of an agent quitting. Childress had no safety net and no backup plan. He found a job doing maintenance for an apartment complex, began publishing think pieces on the side, and made occasional appearances on libertarian-leaning podcasts. In one of Childress’s interviews, the host, Thaddeus Russell, drove home

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the reality of his choice. He’d just gone from making more than a hundred thousand dollars a year to competing for the same kind of trade jobs sought by the migrants he had been arresting. “You took a tumble in terms of your class status,” Russell told him.

When I asked how Childress viewed the decision now, nearly a decade later, he leaned back in his chair and shrugged. “I sleep good at night,” he said.

What should be expected of agents who have qualms about their work? According to Bernardo Zacka, a political-science professor at M.I.T., the question misses the larger issue. In a conversation with Vox about why Border Patrol agents obey immoral orders, he warned against placing the moral onus on individuals over institutions. “The problem is that we put people in situations where they must either act immorally or act heroically,” he said. “That’s a recipe for disaster.”

To Zacka, immigration enforcement is distinct from other bureaucratic functions in that it requires agents to directly intervene in people’s daily lives. “You know you are separating children from their parents-you can see the tears and hear the screams,” he said. “It’s not that bureaucracy shields you from experiencing morally agonizing situations, but that it exposes you to them so frequently that you must develop psychological coping mechanisms that reduce the strain.” Agents asked to implement new enforcement policies might be outraged at first, he continued, but “how long can you go on living with yourself as someone who routinely does morally repugnant acts?”

According to Vega, one of the primary ways agents rationalize what they do is through denial. They downplay the suffering they cause migrants, minimizing arrest and detention as mere inconveniences or casting them as actually helpful for migrants in the long run. They insist on their own powerlessness, regarding themselves as witnesses to, not architects of, the policies they enforce, and blame migrants for their suffering, contending that they “put themselves in that situation” by violating the law.

“I told you they wouldn’t think you were Winnie the Pooh.”

Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Central to such denials is an all-encompassing dehumanization of migrants. Officers are acculturated to see migrants as entirely unlike them, despite the fact that more than half of Border Patrol’s twenty-one thousand agents and nearly a third of ICE ’s twenty-two thousand agents are Latinos, many only a generation or two removed from their own family’s migration. They come to think of migrants and asylum seekers as potential gangsters, rapists, or petty criminals, whose asylum claims are almost always suspect, their stories exaggerated to take advantage of the freedoms and generosity of the state.

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It’s one thing to theorize about this dehumanization but something else to hear it plainly acknowledged by the people enacting it. One former Latino colleague who still works as an agent told me that, at the height of COVID , “we were deporting everybody, and there was this mother who coughed on me in front of her kids, and I was like, ‘Don’t fucking cough on me!’ ” He shook his head recalling the encounter. “It was like a seesaw battle-I’m yelling, then I’m apologizing, then I’m giving all these people food, then I’m saying, ‘Shut the fuck up.’ ” After a pause, he continued, “You see these people like cattle. So I remember I went home and I cried. You don’t want to treat humans like that.”

In 2021, I attended an online panel co-hosted by the group Veterans for Peace. The event commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Winter Soldier Investigation, organized by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, in which more than a hundred veterans spoke publicly about war crimes they had witnessed or participated in. At the time of the panel, Veterans for Peace was connecting the experiences of antiwar veterans with national conversations around police brutality in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd and the long history of racial violence that preceded it.

Jan Barry, a co-founder of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, has made the point that there are now established pathways for antiwar veterans to speak out and that no similar tradition exists for dissenters within law enforcement. And yet, the more I learned about Barry’s movement, the more I imagined the possibility of a similar community of former immigration agents. There are, of course, obvious differences between soldiers and agents, for whom a readiness to kill on behalf of the state is generally understood to be a more distant prospect. But the lethality of deportation, an agent’s primary tool for punishment, deserves recasting.

Last year was ICE ’s deadliest in two decades, with thirty-two reported deaths in custody, a mortality rate nearly four times greater than that under Biden. This year is on track to surpass even those figures. The A.C.L.U. has tallied a total of three hundred and sixty-seven deaths involving Border Patrol personnel since 2010, and, according to the U.N.’s International Organization for Migration, nearly seven thousand people have died or gone missing while crossing the U.S.-Mexico border since 2014. (Most experts agree that the actual number is likely far higher.) Being returned to their native country can have fatal consequences for migrants, too. In 2020, a study by Human Rights Watch found that at least a hundred and thirty-eight of the more than one hundred thousand Salvadorans deported from the U.S. between 2013 and 2019 had died upon returning to El Salvador.

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Brittany DeBarros is the organizing director of About Face: Veterans Against the War, which she describes as a support network for post-9/11 veterans who were “disturbed by the gap between what they’d witnessed and what the American people were being told.” About Face offers veterans a way to navigate shame, guilt, and rage by “standing in the truth of the harm you’ve done,” something that DeBarros, a veteran herself, found liberating. The existence of such groups creates what political scientists call a permission structure: a framework that offers people an opening to change their mind or their behavior and to embrace new, or deeply buried, ideals. In About Face, veterans find community in the shared experience and morals that caused them to reject the systems in which they once perpetuated suffering.

I have long believed that there is a kind of cosmic coin that links border agents and migrants. Just as many soldiers speak of being forever tied to the lives they have taken in combat, I consider myself to be eternally linked to the people I helped capture and deport, and to the people who died trying to evade me. But when I asked former agents about the possibility of forming a group like About Face, most of them reacted with apprehension. There was confusion over what such a group would even be: a support group? An advocacy group? A resource for current agents to find alternative employment?

I had no answers to these questions. Each of us had quit without a roadmap, led only by our own conscience-and conscience, as defined by Hannah Arendt in these pages, is inherently unpolitical. “The fear of being alone and having to face oneself can be a very effective dissuader from wrongdoing,” Arendt writes. “But this fear, by its very nature, is unpersuasive of others.” There is a difference, she argued, between “conscientious objectors,” who act privately to keep their hands clean, and “civil disobedients,” who act publicly and therefore become “bound together by their decision to take a stand.”

Without coming together, I realized, former agents like me were leaving little sign for others to follow.

As the heat of summer began to settle over the Arizona desert, I reunited with Joshua Childress for a beer at a dark English-style pub. Ever since our last meeting, he told me, “all these things just keep popping up.” He added, “I never think about it otherwise.”

Of the few agents I know who have quit on moral grounds, Childress is the only one who did so publicly, speaking to the press within weeks of his resignation. He told me that he sometimes questioned the manner of his departure, whether everything he’d said and written had reached only those already inclined to agree with him. “I don’t know that I’ve changed a single mind,” he said. At times, he wondered if he might have made

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more of an impact by staying in his job and trying “a little harder to be that beacon of light in the darkness, to be that good example.”

His comments brought to mind a friend who works in another branch of D.H.S.-the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services-which oversees asylum, naturalization, and citizenship applications. Under Trump, the agency rebranded its immigration officers as “homeland defenders,” which recently departed officials have said is part of a “strategic demoralization and dismantling of the agency.” (A similar overhaul has been taking place in the Department of Justice, where immigration judges are now commonly referred to as “deportation judges” and those perceived to be granting asylum too freely are fired.) Amid all the turmoil, my friend has persisted. “I don’t know if it’s something we just have to endure, or if being in the right position at the right time in history is going to give us an opportunity to do something meaningful,” he told me.

Such thoughts raise the question of whether enforcement agents and bureaucrats of good conscience who leave their posts are only helping to fulfill the Trump White House’s vision for a hollowed-out, even more violent immigration system. In other words, should lone dissenters stay and carry out orders with as much humanity and subversive resistance as possible, or should they abandon the institution to its cruel designs? The apparent dichotomy fails to account for a third option: that agents, once they leave, might work to change the terms under which the system still functions.

At the pub, Childress and I spoke briefly about ideas of reconciliation and national reckoning, trying to parse where our own actions fit within a larger whole. I explained how I found some solace in taking university students to the border, in working alongside migrant-aid groups, and in visiting asylum seekers in detention. Childress asked if I was religious, and if I thought of these acts as something like repentance. I told him that I wasn’t, and that I understood them to be more like restitution-even though I knew whatever I was trying to redress could never be fully restored.

Childress nodded. He told me that he had recently discussed the very same thing with his priest, wondering how best to atone for the violence he’d participated in. I asked about his church, and he told me that he had been helping with a major renovation project, in which the walls and domes of the sanctuary were being painted with Eastern Orthodox iconography. I was intrigued. As a teen-ager, I had travelled in Eastern Europe and Turkey and seen the painted caves and monasteries of early Christians, who often practiced their faith in secret. Hearing this, he asked if I would like to see the paintings-it was after hours, but he had the keys to the building.

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The church was a few miles down the road, and I trailed his car much in the same way, I briefly thought, that I used to caravan behind fellow-agents as we drove down to the border at the beginning of a shift. I pulled up alongside his vehicle in the empty parking lot and followed him through the door into the narthex, standing alone in the dark foyer as he left to turn on the lights. When he reappeared, he crossed himself before entering the nave, gesturing at the gallery of angels and saints above us, their heads ringed with golden halos. He explained that the icons had been painted in Greece to match the exact measurements of the church before being sent across the ocean. He led me to a panel along the wall that depicted St. Kassiani, the hymnographer, and St. Romanos, the melodist, showing me how he had helped paint the colored border.

Before leaving, Childress clapped his hands, demonstrating the resonance of the space, and described the echoing chants that filled it each Sunday. He invited me to attend a service whenever I wanted, promising that he wouldn’t try to convert me.

A few weeks later, I walked back into the narthex, which was now filled with daylight and brimming with people. I passed the parishioners and found Childress standing near the aisle, a place saved for me beside him. Chanting in multiple languages filled the room and reverberated all around, the voices of the cantors at the kliros blending with the voices of the collective. The rising and falling of the ancient sound settled over me like a veil. I looked at Childress, standing in the sanctuary he had helped adorn. He started to sing. ♦

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Vocabulary review

Revisit each word in the original article. Write a new sentence, then check the meaning in context.