19 November 2024 / Deportation nation

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): The first time Donald Trump was president, he really wanted to deport a lot of people.

*<CLIP> TRUMP: We have some bad hombres here and we’re gonna get ‘em out.*

SCORING IN - Clutch Blackwater

SEAN: But he wasn’t all that successful. Don’t tell him, because it would probably drive him nuts, but his predecessor, Barack Obama, actually deported way more people than he did.

*<CLIP> OBAMA: Thank you for reminding me! Thanks, Obama!*

SEAN: But now Donald Trump is getting a second shot at the title. And people say this time he means business.

*<CLIP> WUSA9 ANCHOR: Immigrant advocacy groups are bracing for a presumed second Trump administration that promises those mass deportations he talked about and a harsher immigration regulations.*

*<CLIP> TRUMP: Immediately after taking office I will launch the largest deportation program in American history.*

*<CLIP> MILLER: Seal the border, deport all the illegals. Now…<laughs>*

SEAN: On *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna figure out what he wants to do, who he wants to do it for him, and how likely it is he’ll get it done.

SCORING OUT

[THEME]

SEAN: Nick Miroff covers the Department of Homeland Security for the *Washington Post*. So he’s bracing himself for a busy few years.

NICK: I mean, me personally, I'm getting ready for like a shock and awe campaign of deportations, arrests, border announcements, court rulings, a lot of the same kind of chaos that we saw during the first Trump administration.

SEAN: We asked him what he’s expecting from the first few weeks.

NICK: Yeah. I mean, I think we'll see a series of, you know, immediate rollbacks of Biden era policies, some of these policies that allowed migrants to apply to come to the United States to live and work legally, namely like the parole programs that Biden used. The CBP one app that let asylum seekers try to get appointments along the southern border. You know, trying to bring some kind of order to that process. And then I think we'll see, you know, the return of some of Trump's signature policies from the first term like ‘Remain in Mexico’. He's talked about bringing that back. But, you know, the big one is going to be, you know, this shift to the interior. Right now, you know, illegal border crossings which have been at, were at, record levels for the first three years of Biden's term, are now at their lowest levels in more than four years, even from, you know, lower than before Trump left office. And so I think that will allow him to pivot almost immediately to the interior of the United States in this mass deportation campaign that was, you know, a core campaign promise of his.

SEAN: And we're speaking Monday morning, and it looks like the president just reposted some random dude on Truth Social saying that he was indeed committed to this plan of mass deportation. What did he say? What did he confirm?

NICK: Well, he essentially endorsed a post on Truth Social by, you know, another user saying that, that they were going to bring back the national emergency declaration and that military assets would be involved in the mass deportation campaign. And that's not anything different than what he said on the campaign trail.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: And I'll make clear that we must use any and all resources needed to stop the invasion, including moving thousands of troops currently stationed overseas.*

NICK: I think we can count on them using military, you know, assets such as bases, aircraft, know, transportation networks. And all of those things will allow them to significantly increase their, you know, throughput, so to speak, in terms of people they can, they can take into custody and try to quickly deport.

<SCORING IN> Infinite whack-a-mole

SEAN: This is going to be a homeland security situation. So, though inspired by Stephen Miller, Kristi Noem is going to be in charge of this?

NICK: Yeah, Kristi Noem is Trump's nominee to be the secretary for the Department of Homeland Security.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS: WEIJIA JIANG, WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem is considered a hardliner on immigration, and if confirmed as DHS secretary, she would be at the forefront of the plan to deport millions of undocumented immigrants.*

*KRISTI NOEM, SOUTH DAKOTA GOVERNOR: Make no mistake an invasion of our country is happening and our border is a war zone.*

NICK: But I think that this effort is really going to be led out of the White House by Stephen Miller, his speechwriter and main immigration ideologue.

*<CLIP> MSNBC: JONATHAN LEMIRE: President elect Donald Trump is expected to name longtime aide and immigration hardliner Stephen Miller as his deputy chief of staff for policy.*

*<CLIP> STEPHEN MILLER: Who is going to stand up and say, the cartels are gone, the criminal markers are gone, the gangs are gone? America is for Americans and Americans only.*

NICK: And Tom Homan, who will be in the, kind of, operational role.

*<CLIP> ABC 6 PHILADELPHIA: Former ICE director Tom Homan will be the president elect's border czar.*

*<CLIP> 2024 REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION: TOM HOMAN: I got a message to the millions of illegal aliens that Joe Biden’s releasing in our country in violation of federal law. You better start packing now.*

NICK: And there are few people who know the system, you know the deportation system better than Homan, who spent his career in immigration enforcement in various roles, including Trump's acting director of ICE during the first 18 months of Trump's first term.

<SCORING OUT> Infinite whack-a-mole

SEAN: What is standing in their way, if anything?

NICK: Immigration activists and attorneys are saying that they are going to ramp up the resistance once again and will try to use similar strategies to those that they deployed during Trump's first term to try to slow down the pace of deportations and to try to draw attention to, I think some of the, you know, crueler and harsher aspects of immigration enforcement. So I think we'll see a lot of legal challenges. But, you know, it feels like this time will be different. The Republican Party obviously will be in control of both houses of Congress. The Supreme Court is stacked in the president-elect's favor. And the terrain has just, you know, changed significantly. I think, you know, we've seen this big shift in public opinion in favor of a more aggressive deportation campaign, including in some of the so-called sanctuary cities like New York where, you know, tens of thousands of migrants are living in hotels and, you know, have, have arrived over the past few years. And that has produced a lot of tension.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: MAYOR ERIC ADAMS: This issue will destroy New York City. Destroy New York City.*

SEAN: But even if the American public is on board with a mass deportation, it's going to take a lot of resources. Do we have those resources in place?

NICK: No. And this was, you know, one of the reasons that Trump never was able to carry out that, you know, 2 or 3 million deportations that he promised during his first term. The, the highest levels they ever reached were around 300,000 or so. So I think we can expect that the current levels are certainly going to go up, but they will face both logistical and financial challenges to, to getting to the kind of, you know, millions that Trump has promised. That's one reason they're going to try to leverage the military assets. And, you know, I do think that there will be more funding available, you know, for this kind of thing through Congress. They could ramp up the number of detention beds that they have available. They can get more aircraft. They can get more personnel to try to assist in this effort. But does that mean they can deport all 11 or 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States? No.

SEAN: Do we think the American people will still have the stomach for this once it starts happening?

NICK: Yeah, you know, Sean, that's something that I have seen over the past, you know, eight years of covering immigration enforcement in the Department of Homeland Security, is that the public really can't stand to come face to face with what, you know, the reality of immigration enforcement is. It's just…it looks really bad. And everybody has a cell phone camera right now. And once you start to see images of children, you know, crying and suffering and being torn out of their homes and screaming for their, you know, their, their parents as their parents are being hauled off by uniformed, you know, government agents. You know, that kind of thing has a, has a serious cost. And while the incoming administration, you know, thinks that it has a mandate for that type of thing. I think that, you know, folks like Homan know that once the public starts to see that over and over again, that it's going to erode the support for Trump doing something of this kind.

<SCORING IN> The Chills – BMC

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: ROB REYNOLDS, CORRESPONDENT: Outraged by the Trump administration's policy of taking migrant children away from their parents. Protesters rallied in Los Angeles. <protesters chanting>*

NICK: I mean, look at, you know, the zero tolerance family separation episode of Trump's first term.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: ROB REYNOLDS, CORRESPONDENT: The Trump administration says it is seizing children and separating families as a deterrent. Scaring other would-be migrant parents away.*

NICK: The backlash that that produced was so enormous that it even, you know, reached Trump's family. And Melania and Ivanka were among those telling him that he had had to stop it because, you know, it just became unsustainable politically to do something like that. Another thing, Sean, I think, to look for is that there's going to be a fundamental tension going forward between the expectation that Trump has created for lowering inflation and for carrying out this mass deportation effort, because if you remove hundreds of thousands of workers from the labor force, you can't deliver cheaper food, cheaper childcare and lower cost housing. Those two things just don’t go together. Do they have the political skills to manage the, you know, the backlash to that? That remains to be seen. I think, you know, they may have a relatively narrow window in which to try to carry out some of the harsher elements of what Trump is proposing, particularly with the military involved.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Nick Miroff. *Washington Post* dot com. I’m Sean Rameswaram. When we’re back, we’re gonna look at Trump’s mass deportation inspo. We’re going back to the 1950s on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back. And we’re joined by Kelly Lytle Hernandez.

KELLY LYTLE HERNANDEZ (UCLA professor): I am the Thomas E. Lifka Endowed Chair of history at UCLA.

SEAN: Go Bruins.

KELLY: Go Bruins.   
  
SEAN: We asked Kelly to tell us about Donald Trump’s mass deportation inspiration. It’s a government program that just went ahead and included the racism right in the name. So pardon the racial slurs in this half of the show.   
  
KELLY: President elect Trump has referenced that he has taken his inspiration from Operation Wetback of 1954, which to date is the largest mass deportation campaign in U.S. history.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP AT RNC: The Republican platform promises to launch the largest deportation operation in the history of our country – even larger than that of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.*

*<CLIP> EISENHOWER: It is America's right of our government to limit the number of immigrants our nation can absorb…*

KELLY: That was a campaign that targeted Mexican immigrants, undocumented immigrants in particular. It was defined by racial profiling. It was defined by roadblocks and sweeps across the southwest United States. And so, yeah, we have seen this before, and it is quite concerning that that might be the blueprint for what's to come.

SEAN: I know it's not as acceptable to say that term anymore, but it sounds like it was a lot more acceptable in the 1950s. Can you remind us the origin of the term ‘wetback’?

KELLY: It's a racial slur. It was a racial slur then. It's a racial slur now, but it was more commonly used in the popular discourse back in the 1950s. The origins of that term are disputed, but most people think that it's about during the 1920s, during prohibition, when immigrants come across the border with alcohol—could be wetbacks. Or that you have Mexican rights for crossing the Rio Grande and are going into the water coming out with wet shirts. Right? So [they] are wetbacks. So we can't quite figure out the origins of. It's one of those two.

SEAN: Hmm. What's going on in the 1950s when someone comes up with ‘Operation Wetback’. What's the, what's the backdrop?

KELLY: The backdrop to Operation Wetback of 1954 is actually a legal immigration program called the Bracero Program.

SCORING IN—LUKE TAKES A TRAIN

*<CLIP> COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA GROWERS INFORMATIONAL NEWS REEL, 1962: Yes, with the domestic supply of farm labor being inadequate, Braceros are a must.*

KELLY: So back in 1942, during World War Two, the United States was experiencing a labor shortage as all the young men are going off to war and are working in urban industries. Farmers in particular are saying we don't have enough laborers.

*<CLIP> COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA GROWERS INFORMATIONAL NEWS REEL, 1962: The term most commonly used is Braceros. In Spanish this means a man who works with his arms and hands…*

KELLY: So the United States government goes and develops contracts with the Mexican government and other governments in the Caribbean to bring in short term laborers, largely to work in agriculture, but also on railroads. That Bracero program brings in millions of Mexican workers between 1942 and 1965.

*<CLIP> COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA GROWERS INFORMATIONAL NEWS REEL, 1962: The fact is that farm wages have gone up steadily for many years, but we still don’t have enough seasonal domestic laborers willing to do this kind of work.*

KELLY: But it has limitations. Women are not eligible to become Bracero workers. People coming from urban areas in Mexico are not eligible to become Bracero workers. Industrial workers are not eligible to become bracero workers. So you have a large segment of the Mexican population who needs work but doesn't have access to the Bracero program. So what you get is, at the same time you have millions of Mexican workers coming to the United States legally through the procedural program, you also have large numbers of undocumented workers who are coming to the United States. So that is the backdrop. You have a surge of legal immigration from Mexico. You also have a surge of undocumented immigration from Mexico.

SCORING OUT

KELLY: And so the campaign of 1954 grows alongside the Bracero program.

<CLIP> 1953 NEWSREEL: Statistics have indicated that when the traffic in wetbacks is high, the supply of dope increases proportionally….

KELLY: It actually began during the 1940s and just gets bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger until it hits its climax in 1954.

<CLIP> 1953 NEWSREEL on WETBACK OPERATION: The job has been compared to trying to scoop the tide off the beach and pour it back into the ocean.

SEAN: How do they target the right people or, you know, people who are undocumented?

KELLY: Well, they don't.

SEAN: Huh

KELLY: They target and I quote, anyone of Mexican appearance.

SEAN: Oh, wow!

KELLY: And so they're sweeping across the southwestern United States, entangling U.S. citizens, legal immigrants and undocumented immigrants in the search for people of, quote, Mexican appearance. So it's a racial profiling campaign that impacts citizens and non-citizens alike, lawful migrants and people who have crossed without documentation as well.

*<CLIP> 1953 NEWSREEL: [TRAIN WHISTLE] This is the morning prison train out of Southern California into Mexico. It makes this run every day at about dawn. It’s cargo: Mexican wetbacks, who have sneaked across the border and are being deported….*

SCORING IN—THAT PARACHUTE DREAM

KELLY: On June 10th, 1954. The U.S. Border Patrol…several, about a thousand officers spread out across California and Arizona near the border, and they set up roadblocks to stop anyone of Mexican appearance moving north on the roads into the United States. They sweep up about 10,000, 11,000 people on those roadblocks, again, conducting racial profile operations, targeting anyone who looks Mexican, heading north into the United States. About two weeks later, they unleash these task forces that sweep from north to south, pushing people out of the country, arresting people wherever they can. And it's not just farms. They are raiding restaurants. They are raiding racetracks. They are raiding communities. These are really big media spectacles. Once they get people arrested in towns: Sacramento, Chicago, Los Angeles, wherever it is in the country, they take people down to the border where they hold them in mass detention camps and they hold them until they have a train, a plane or a boat that is ready to mass deport people into Mexico.

SEAN: Hm.

KELLY: So they would cram people onto these trains, planes and boats. The boats, for example, would bring bananas up to the United States and then be packed with deportees who will be taken down to Veracruz, Mexico. A congressional investigation into these boat lifts – these ships – two years after Operation Wetback, 1954, called these boats penal hell ships. The conditions were outrageous. There were several protests on the, on the ships. And so one of the tactics of operation went back in 1954 was to dislocate people who are being deported into the center of Mexico. So they're far from home, the United States and far from homes in Mexico. And this is a punishment tactic to make sure that people feel that they are abandoned and that it's extremely difficult for them to get home wherever that home may be.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Hm. How many people were caught up in ‘Operation Wetback’?

KELLY: Now, that is an excellent question, right? So Donald Trump and others will tell you often that the United States Border Patrol rounded up and deported a million people

*<CLIP> TRUMP, 2015: Did you like Dwight Eisenhower as a president at all?   
CBS REPORTER: Well I wasn’t around…  
TRUMP: But he was a fair man.   
CBS REPORTER: He was a great American.   
TRUMP: Well he did this with over a million people…*

KELLY: That is a total fabrication.   
  
SEAN: Huh.  
  
KELLY: It was a fabrication back in 1954. It's a fabrication now. The Border Patrol likely apprehended maybe 300,000 people during the summer of 1954, which is really when the campaign happened. But yeah, the commissioner of the I.N.S. inflated those numbers. And this is really important. I'm really glad that you asked this question, because what the I.N.S., the Immigration Naturalization Service and the Border Patrol is doing is…they’re showing that there's an ever increasing number of deportations during the 1950s. They tell the world that that’s about a million apprehensions in the summer of 1954 and then after 1954, the number of apprehensions drop off dramatically well into the 1960s. You only have maybe 20,000, 30,000 people being apprehended. And the story that they're telling us is that aggressive immigration law enforcement with all of these punitive tactics is what, quote, solved the crisis at the US-Mexico border or the immigration crisis. That is absolutely not what happened. The Border Patrol one did not apprehend as many people as we're being told. Those numbers are simply inflated. And you can go into the Border Patrol's archive and it's clear, plain as day that those are inflated numbers. But two, they changed the rules of the Bracero program so that more people could become eligible to be legal workers in the United States. And so and then three, after the campaign of 1954, they demobilized all their special task forces and they put Border Patrol officers on two men and one man patrols who couldn't round up as many people. The lesson here, right, is that the way that we quote, “solved” the immigration crisis in 1954 is not through mass deportation, but in fact, through legalization. And we stopped deporting people.

SEAN: Why is it that Trump wants to point to ‘Operation Wetback’ as some sort of model for what he wants to do when he re-enters office?

KELLY: It's inflammatory, the title of the operation alone, but also the way in which it was conducted. I think that one of the things also to recognize about the campaign of 1954 is that although a million people were not apprehended, this does not mean it wasn't hugely impactful in the lives of people. And it wasn't terrifying.

SCORING IN—VAQUERO

KELLY: Everywhere the Border Patrol went during the summer of 1954, they invited journalists to come with them, and the journalists snapped photos of entire families being rounded up. They snapped photos of workers running through kitchens trying to escape the Border Patrol. They chronicled the stories of community centers being turned into detention centers. And that constant press was absolutely terrifying to people on the ground. And it's trying to instigate people to engage in what some people call self-deportation. Right. And that is a big part of the campaign of 1954 that people don't talk about. So when you have a president who is about media and spectacle, of course he's going to gravitate to a campaign that was about media and spectacle and that that actually, in fact, was one of its primary tactics.

SEAN: Well, see you on the boat, Kelly.

KELLY: <laughs> Send me the pamphlet.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Professor Kelly Lytle Hernandez. History. UCLA. Our program today was produced by Haleema Shah and Miles Bryan. We were edited by Jolie Myers and fact checked by Laura Bullard. Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kritinsdottir mixed this episode of *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]