

POLITICS 2024 ELECTIONS

Kamala Harris Was Never Biden's 'Border Czar.' Here's What She Really Did

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Vice President Kamala Harris at the National Palace in Guatemala City on June 7, 2021. Jacquelyn Martin—AP

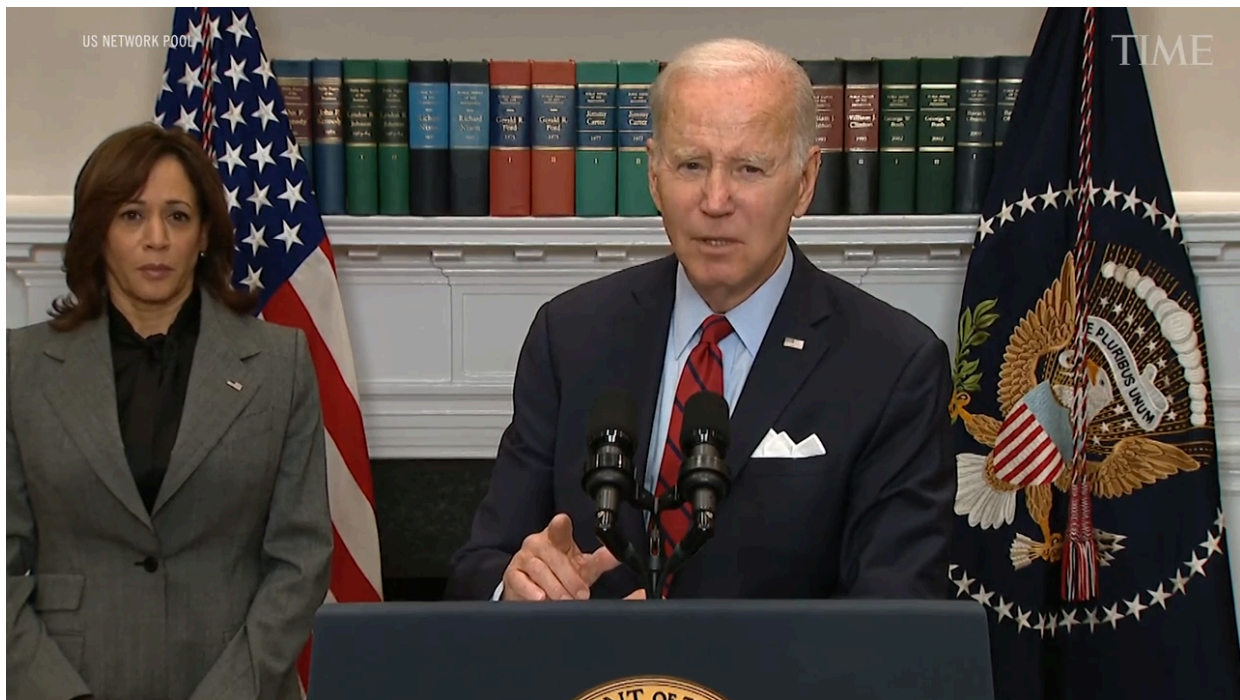
BY VERA BERGENGRUEN X

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On her first foreign trip as Vice President in June 2021, Kamala Harris was tasked with delivering a blunt message in Guatemala City. "I want to be clear to folks in this region who are thinking about making that dangerous trek to the United States-Mexico border: Do not come," she said at a press conference, pausing for effect. "Do not come."

Three years later, that sound bite may come to haunt Harris' nascent presidential campaign. Despite her warning, border crossings reached historic highs during the Biden Administration. Republican critics cast the episode as a symbol of Harris's ineffective tenure as President Biden's "border czar," a misleading label they applied after she was charged with helming diplomatic efforts to address the root causes of migration from Central America to the U.S.

"Kamala had one job," Nikki Haley told the crowd at the Republican National Convention in Milwaukee last week. "One job. And that was to fix the border. Now imagine her in charge of the entire country."



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In fact, Harris was never put in charge of the border or immigration policy. Nor was she involved in overseeing law-enforcement efforts or guiding the federal response to the crisis. Her mandate was much narrower: to focus on examining and improving the underlying conditions in the Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—which has been racked by decades of poverty, war, chronic violence, and political instability. The strategy relied on allocating billions for economic programs and stimulating private-sector investment in the region in hopes that these programs would ultimately lead fewer migrants to make the dangerous journey north.

It was the first high-profile assignment in Harris' tenure as Vice President, and it was an especially thankless one. At best, addressing the “push factors” that spur migration would lead to incremental improvements and take a generation to yield results. At worst, it would make Harris the face of the border crisis, one of the Biden administration's biggest political vulnerabilities. “To the extent that this was a useful assignment, she did reasonably well in getting the private sector to invest in Central America,” says Muzaffar Chishti, a senior fellow at the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute. “But it was an assignment that could not produce results anytime soon.”

The so-called “root causes strategy” focused on improving economic and security conditions by creating jobs, combating corruption, improving human and labor rights, and reducing violence. Harris allocated funds for humanitarian relief from natural disasters, and directed more than 10 million COVID-19 vaccines to the Northern Triangle countries. She held bilateral meetings with the region's leaders, as well as meetings with NGOs, business executives and human rights advocates. She worked with the U.S. Justice Department to launch an Anti-Corruption task force focused on prosecuting corruption cases with ties to the region, as well as Anti-Migrant Smuggling task forces in Mexico and Guatemala.

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companies to invest more than \$5 billion in the region. The Vice President “put

her name on the line with very serious senior CEOs and kind of created a brand appeal for Central America that didn't exist," says Ricardo Zúniga, who until recently served as the U.S. special envoy to Central America.

Harris also spent time in Washington communicating with regional leaders. One tangible result, according to two former U.S. officials, was that it gave the U.S. the standing and relationships to help prevent Guatemalan prosecutors from overturning the results of last year's presidential election, which was won by anti-corruption outsider Bernardo Arévalo. While delayed, the ultimately peaceful transition of power avoided the political instability that Biden Administration officials feared could cause a spike in migration. The U.S. applied public pressure through sanctions and visa restrictions on officials they accused of undermining the democratic process, as well as behind the scenes. Harris's team was directly involved, especially her national security adviser Philip Gordon, who traveled to the region to push for a peaceful democratic transfer of power, according to the two former U.S. officials.

But the narrow mandate given to Harris ignored shifting migration patterns, experts say. The slow process of addressing the "push factors," or reasons that migrants leave their countries, says Chisthi, can't compete with the "pull factors"—the economic and safety incentives that draw people to the U.S. When Biden assumed office, officials thought Central America would continue to be the epicenter of migration pressure. "We were wrong," says Zuniga. After the initial surge, migration from the Northern Triangle largely stabilized. By December 2023, 54% of encounters at the southern border involved citizens of countries other than Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data.



Vice President Kamala Harris tours the El Paso U.S. Customs and Border Protection Central Processing Center, on June 25, 2021. Patrick T. Fallon—AFP/Getty Images

Much of Harris's work failed to break through back home. Instead, she became the target of Republican broadsides about the border crisis and was repeatedly criticized for not visiting the U.S.-Mexico border. "She's dealing with a narrative problem," says Zuniga. With immigration topping the list of Americans' concerns, according to **recent Gallup polls**, an ongoing humanitarian crisis at the border, and political deadlock on immigration reform and funding, Harris emerged as the most visible scapegoat.

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As they shift their focus from Biden to Harris, it's clear that Republicans plan to attack Harris's role on immigration issues. "The border crisis is a Kamala Harris crisis," former President Trump's running mate, Ohio Sen. JD Vance, declared at a July 22 rally. A recent National Republican Senatorial Committee memo outlining talking points calls her "the architect of [Biden's] biggest failure." In a post on Truth Social on July 23, Trump said her "incompetence gave us the WORST and MOST DANGEROUS Border anywhere in the World."

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, said if Harris is elected, he will "need to triple the border wall, razor wire barriers and National Guard on the border."

Harris has a broader record on immigration, including backing a bipartisan border-security deal aimed at reducing border crossings earlier this year. As a Senator, she was an outspoken advocate of legal protections for DACA recipients, made headlines for aggressively questioning Trump immigration officials, and derided the then-President's border wall as a "medieval vanity project." But it's clear the "border czar" label has become a political liability.

Some Harris allies have expressed frustration with Biden for putting her in this position. In doing so, he was repeating a familiar pattern—it was a portfolio Biden himself was given as Vice President. In 2014, when a surge in children and families from Central America overwhelmed the U.S. immigration system, then-President Barack Obama tasked him with leading the international response to the crisis. "The solution to this problem is to address the root causes of this immigration in the first place," Biden said on a trip to Guatemala City that summer. "Especially poverty, insecurity and the lack of the rule of law."

Seven years later, little had changed when Harris gave the same speech, in the same place. Politically, "the problem is that no one cares about the root causes," says Chisthi. "It's too abstract. And frankly, very little can be done about them in the short run, while the public is focused on what is happening with the border today."

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