

Opinion

‘Criminals?’ Hardly. That’s who the caravan is fleeing.

The would-be immigrants to the U.S. traveling from Central America are trying to escape rule by governments tied to gangs, organized crime and other criminal enterprises.



ORLANDO SIERRA/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Victoria Sanford

As thousands of Honduran migrants seeking asylum in the United States trek northward through Mexico, President Trump has pledged to stop them at the border by militarizing it with armed federal troops, under the guise of protecting Americans from “criminals” and an “invasion.”

What he fails to recognize is that cruelty won’t solve the current refugee crisis. Neither will buddying up with authoritarian leaders in Central America. Instead, those two strategies only deepen the crisis, because criminality and misrule are exactly what the caravan is fleeing.

What Mr. Trump calls an invasion is actually the visible face of a deadly crisis of governance and violence in almost all of Central America — a retreat from the rule of law in favor of rule by corruption and criminality abetted by officials with impunity.

For example, Mr. Trump supports President Jimmy Morales, his authoritarian counterpart in Guatemala. Mr. Morales is under investigation for possible corruption by the United Nations Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala. He has fought back by revoking the visas of many of the commission’s investigators.

Currently, violence reigns in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador; the three countries have the world’s highest homicide rates, and the pattern they have set — daily killings, forced gang recruitment, extortion, gender attacks and kidnapping for ransom — may be creeping into Nicaragua.

The criminal groups behind this are a legacy of civil wars fought in the 1970s and 1980s, and of past military regimes that left 75,000 dead in El Salvador and 200,000 dead in Guatemala. Honduras, which has been a base for American military operations in Central America for decades, is now considered the most violent. Unlike Guatemala and El Salvador, it has never even had an official counting of the dead.

In those three northern Central American countries, military units are entrenched in a complex web of organized crime, drug trafficking, gangs, political parties and corrupt clandestine police groups. The gangs have ties to the police — who hunt gang members if they don’t pay their quota or become liabilities because they know too much after colluding with corrupt police officers. The gangs also have ties to organized crime and drug traffickers who, in turn, have their own ties to the military and the police.

In the 1980s, gang members informed the police about factory workers, union organizers, teachers and students involved in political protest. In ex-

change, the police granted the gangs neighborhood territory for illicit activities. In Guatemala, after peace accords in the 1990s ended a decades-long civil war, clandestine groups with ties to police and army officials used army routes, landing strips and heliports to transport weapons and drugs.

Guatemala’s networks illustrate how tightly interwoven those systems can become. For example, gangs pay the police to ignore the gang operations in their territories.

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Those payments flow upward: Local police officers pay their boss, who in turn pays off his boss. At the higher levels, drug traffickers might buy the services of a very senior police officer, who in turn might

then send payments downward, to individual officers. Narcotraffickers and crime syndicates also pay off gang members to support illicit trafficking and to assert their power; the jobs vary from hit man, kidnapper, extortionist, arsonist, car-jacker and recruiter of low-level supporters of criminal activities.

The interlocking power structures of violence, bribes, threats and patronage make everyday life extremely dangerous for Central Americans. Any interac-

tion between gang members and ordinary citizens carries two meanings. The first: “Will you give me that money?” Answering “no” is seen as a direct challenge to the gang’s power. The second: “Do you accept my control over your life?” Refusing to give up even one dollar can designate a person an enemy of the gang, which is a very dangerous position to be in.

Central American governments know all this. Their responses range from turning a blind eye to crime, to corrupt acceptance, to active complicity. Members of the elite work within and dominate these violent power structures. And many of these clandestine groups have ties to Mexico’s horrifically violent drug cartels.

This dark picture of what Central Americans seek to escape is not a new experience in American immigration. It recalls other horrors that forced human waves — Irish, Italian, Greek, Jewish, Hungarian, German, Polish and more — to flee parts of Central and Southern Europe for America rather than endure violence, crime, discrimination, misgovernment and hunger in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Did America lose by welcoming them? Think about just how much those grateful newcomers have added to the fabric of American society.

Like the great majority of those masses, today’s Central Americans seek merely to live in safety, to work

hard and to provide for their families. They are not criminals, as Mr. Trump would have it. They are the victims of criminal enterprises that only pretend to govern.

If President Trump, nevertheless, insists on stemming the flow of refugees, he must at least show America’s compassion for them and insist that their home countries adopt reforms that produce honest and law-abiding governments. He should support the efforts of the anti-impunity commission for Guatemala. And he should answer the call of citizens of Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua who have sought to expand the commission to a regional United Nations Commission Against Impunity.

The Honduran caravan is a call for help in ending violence and impunity, and replacing it with the rule of law. Those are the commission’s goals for Guatemala. Mr. Trump and Congress must strengthen those efforts and help them become a regional campaign to rein in rule by criminal cliques and murderous gangs that make daily life intolerable for the average citizen.

Ensuring fair elections is also needed, of course. But elections are meaningless without rule of law.

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A Honduran student headed to class was shot dead by gang members. Feet away, her relatives mourned.

Why Democrats must impeach the president

They won the House by promising to hold Trump accountable.

Tom Steyer

On Tuesday, voters across the country demanded accountability in government, insisting their elected representatives not just talk a good game but act in the interests of the American people.

Nationwide, Democrats received 7 percent more votes than Republicans — about three million — in an election that saw a higher percentage of voters than any midterm since 1966. Those voters flipped seven governorships and 367 state legislative seats to Democrats, giving them majorities in seven more state chambers. Most important, voters ended Donald Trump and his Republican enablers’ free rein in Washington by flipping the House.

But this blue wave should have been even bigger. Democrats’ inability to run the table on a Republican Party that depended on lying, race-baiting and suppressing the vote is a sign that the American people do not know what the Democratic Party stands for. We Democrats can begin to answer that question by acting to guarantee equal justice under the law.

As President Trump continues to accelerate his lawlessness, the new Democratic House majority must initiate impeachment proceedings against him as soon as it takes office in January.

For nearly two years, Mr. Trump has publicly flouted his oath of office. He has

turned the presidency into a money-making enterprise for a family business he refuses to divest from, in direct violation of any plain reading of the Constitution. He is all but an undicted co-conspirator in two federal felony cases. He has created an atmosphere of criminality through his hateful, violent rhetoric against political opponents, journalists and private citizens alike.

Most egregiously, he has a longstanding pattern of obstructing justice. On Wednesday, he continued this by firing Attorney General Jeff Sessions and installing Matthew Whitaker — who has publicly called for curtailing the special counsel’s investigation — as acting attorney general, sparking a constitutional crisis that threatens the rule of law itself.

As the list of Mr. Trump’s impeachable offenses — at least nine and counting — has grown, more than 6.2 million people across the country have signed a petition, created by my organization Need to Impeach, demanding that their representatives confront his lawlessness. For months, public support for impeaching the president has been roughly equal to what it was before Richard Nixon resigned.

Yet the current Democratic leadership has insisted that no one so much as mention the word “impeachment.” Instead, they have suggested using Mr. Trump’s abuses of power as bargaining chips in future negotiations.

For too long, Democratic leaders have convinced their fellow elected



A sign in West Palm Beach, Fla. More than six million Americans have signed a petition asking their congressional representatives to begin impeachment proceedings.

officials that bland, nonconfrontational and incremental centrism is the way to win elections and make progress. In truth, it’s just the easiest way to protect the balance of power in Washington. But by trying to meet a corrupt Republican Party halfway, instead of taking clear stands for what’s right, they have failed to define the party and failed to protect their constituents.

We see the same approach on impeachment: As a way to delay making a

decision, Democratic leaders have insisted on waiting for the special counsel, Robert Mueller, to deliver his report. But now the investigation is at risk, because Mr. Whitaker could prevent the special counsel’s team from reaching a just conclusion or even releasing its findings to the public.

The current, Republican-led Congress could have already taken action to shield Mr. Mueller or to put Mr. Trump in check. It still can. If it does not, House

Democrats must prepare subpoenas, to be issued as soon as they take over, to ensure that the public learns the truth uncovered by the special counsel, and call on his team to testify under oath in public hearings.

Should the establishment refuse to give up conventional orthodoxy and take up impeachment proceedings when the new Congress convenes, freshmen members — many of whom ran and won because of their promise to stand up to the president — must challenge the establishment and demand a say over the agenda. An overwhelming majority of people in this country elected them to hold this president accountable. There is no majority without them. That means no one has the votes for a leadership title without their support.

At a moment when just one-third of all Americans trust their government to do what is right, winning a majority has to mean much more than just frustrating Republican legislative goals and scoring debating points. Democrats must stand up for the safety of the American people and our entire democratic system.

We cannot allow this to be an argument about what Republicans will permit — it’s about demanding the truth and protecting the foundations of our free society. Anything less would mean abandoning the Constitution.

TOM STEYER is the founder of Need to Impeach and NextGen America.