

Trump Homeland Security chief defends family separation and caging children

Patrick Martin
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The appearance by Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen before the House Homeland Security Committee was intended to serve the political purposes of both the Trump administration and the Democrats, who now command a majority in the House.

Nielsen took the occasion, her first appearance of the year before Congress, to publicly defend Trump's declaration of a national emergency. Trump issued the order February 15 to divert funding from the Pentagon budget to pay for his border wall, in defiance of Congress and the US Constitution.

Last week, the House of Representatives voted to disallow the declaration and a similar measure is expected to pass the Republican-controlled Senate next week, with anywhere from four to 14 Republicans expected to join all 47 Democrats in the vote.

Nielsen met behind closed doors with Senate Republicans Tuesday and White House aides have sought to apply pressure to prevent a Senate action that would be politically embarrassing, although it is not expected to have any practical effect, since Trump will simply veto the resolution to disallow his emergency declaration.

For their part, Democrats pretended to be outraged about the systematic brutality of the US border regime, although they supported similar methods without protest when Barack Obama was in the White House. Not one of the immigration enforcement actions taken by Trump—with the exception of the emergency declaration itself—goes further than measures taken under the Obama administration, which deported more immigrants in its eight years than all previous US governments.

Despite the posturing on both sides, Wednesday's hearing for Nielsen, and three other congressional hearings the same day on immigration-related issues, gave a glimpse of the horrific conditions facing immigrants, for which both corporate-controlled parties are responsible.

Far from being a country “with liberty and justice for

all,” as every school child is told in the daily brainwashing known as the “Pledge of Allegiance,” America is the land that puts innocent children into cages fit for dogs, breaks up families, separating parents and children, and is preparing—at least according to Nielsen—to detain and imprison nearly one million immigrants this coming year.

Nielsen's hearing was mainly notable for her efforts to defend the caging of children and their separation from their parents. In response to a question from one committee Democrat, Bonnie Watson Coleman of New Jersey, Nielsen defined a chain-link enclosure for immigrant children—i.e., a cage—as a “detention space.”

Asked, “Does it differ from the cages you put your dogs in when you let them stay outside?”, Nielsen replied that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) “detention space” is “larger, it has facilities, it provides room to sit, to stand, to lay [sic] down.” Coleman replied that her dog's cage had similar room.

Nielsen persisted with her defense, telling committee Chairman Bennie Thompson, “Sir, they are not cages, they are areas of the border facility that are carved out for the safety and protection of those who remain there while they're being processed.” Thompson replied in the mildest language, telling her, “Don't mislead the committee.”

The DHS secretary adamantly defended the Trump policy of forcible separation of children from their parents after family groups, mainly from Central America, presented themselves at border posts and asked for asylum. She claimed that the “zero tolerance” policy—arresting and imprisoning every asylum claimant—had been implemented humanely.

This and similar declarations allowed Democratic members of the committee to deliver loud speeches denouncing the brutality of the policy of forced separation. None of them objected to similar measures

when they were employed by the DHS and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) during the Obama administration, albeit on a smaller scale and with less publicity.

Nielsen employed a political sleight of hand, portraying the dire condition of many asylum seekers when they reach the US-Mexico border, frequently after lengthy treks through the Sonoran Desert without sufficient food, water or shelter, as though that was the “emergency” that concerned Trump when he made his declaration. She called the mass migration of desperate Central American families a “humanitarian catastrophe,” which it certainly is.

However, as far as Trump and congressional Republicans are concerned, the emergency is not the physical condition of hungry, sick and cold immigrants, but the possibility that they could gain entry to the United States. The purpose of both the declaration of national emergency and the wall itself is to prevent immigrants from ever setting foot on US soil, condemning them to death in Mexico or in their home countries further south.

One House Republican defended this line of thinking in a particularly stupid comment. Representative Clay Higgins of Louisiana noted that, according to CBP, some 76,000 immigrants were taken into custody in February 2019, the most for that month in more than a decade. This number was larger than the 73,000 US troops who landed on Normandy on D-Day in 1944, which he called the greatest invasion in history. Therefore, Higgins argued, the immigrant influx was an even greater threat to US national security.

The deepening crisis in the Central American countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras is driving tens of thousands of desperate workers and peasants to flee their countries to escape police repression, gang violence and acute poverty, all of it the product of the domination of the region for more than a century by American imperialism. It is a measure of that crisis that Nielsen suggested that the total number of immigrant detainees in 2019 might be as high as 900,000, and more than a million for the fiscal year—a sizable proportion of the population of those three small countries.

Two other House committee hearings dealt with aspects of the immigration crisis and the policies of the Trump administration. The House Judiciary Committee heard testimony from recipients of limited protection against deportation under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) programs. Both have been terminated by Trump, but his

orders have been held up by court orders maintaining the status quo while further litigation takes place. On Monday, a federal district court in California temporarily blocked enforcement of Trump’s order to terminate TPS protection for 250,000 long-term immigrants from El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua and Sudan.

The House Appropriations Committee took testimony from the acting inspector general of the Department of Homeland Security, who is conducting three investigations into aspects of DHS operations: the inability of the agency to track parents and children in the same family after they were separated; the failure, in many cases, to offer parents the chance to take their children with them when they were deported; and the policy of turning away asylum seekers at US ports of entry when they attempted to file asylum claims under a longstanding legal procedure.

Appearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Kevin McAleenan, head of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) unit of DHS, discussed figures released the previous day showing 76,000 immigrants detained in February 2019. While arrests for illegal border crossing reached nearly 400,000 in fiscal 2018, this was only one quarter of the record total of 1.64 million in 2000, the final year of the Clinton administration.

McAleenan said that more than 50,000 adults are currently in ICE custody, the highest number ever. That is because while previous administrations generally released detained immigrants pending adjudication of their cases, Trump has ordered an end to the policy he has called “catch and release,” insisting that every immigrant arrested by ICE should be held in custody.



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