

Who is Alejandro Mayorkas?

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Early this week, President-elect Joe Biden announced the names of several members of his putative cabinet. Media propaganda about the inclusion of women and minorities in these selections overshadowed the right-wing record of the group, largely drawn from the national-security establishment.

One pick in particular was lauded as marking a new, major milestone. This was the announcement of Alejandro Mayorkas for the post of secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Born in Havana and brought to the US as an infant by his parents, Mayorkas would be the first Latino to hold this position.

In addition, he would be the first immigrant to oversee a department that had become synonymous with the inhumane anti-immigrant policies of the Trump administration. This background in and of itself, the media and Biden's apologists claim, indicates a new orientation toward immigrants, both documented and undocumented.

As Janet Murguía, the president of UnidosUS, a Latino advocacy organization, put it, "After four long, dark years ... [and] a general contempt for Latinos from the highest office in the land, Mayorkas's nomination signals a new day for the Department of Homeland Security and for all our country."

Various immigrant rights groups also added their own laudatory comments. Benjamin Johnson, the executive director of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, issued a statement declaring: "This nomination is not only smart, it is historic. ... He will not only bring critical leadership but a set of life experiences that will animate the department's work ahead."

Candy Marshall, president of TheDream.US, which provides college scholarships to the immigrants covered by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, said that this particular nomination

is "another hopeful sign for Dreamers and a signal that the Biden administration is ready to deliver on its commitments for Dreamers."

Erika Andiola, chief advocacy officer for RAICES, a nonprofit that provides legal services to low-income immigrants, went even further, stating, "We hope that as the first Latino and someone who has advocated for immigrant rights, [Mayorkas] will change the direction of DHS once and for all."

These comments express an understandable desire for a change from the cruelty and inhumanity toward immigrants characteristic of US government policy, especially over the past four years. However, the notion that the nomination of Mayorkas will accomplish that is at best wishful thinking.

The narrative being hawked about Mayorkas highlights his ethnicity and status as an immigrant, that his mother was a Holocaust survivor, and that he is on the board of directors for HIAS, the celebrated Jewish-American non-profit that provides humanitarian aid to refugees. Moreover, while serving as director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) during President Barack Obama's first term, he was involved in the creation and implementation of the DACA program—something that could trigger Republican opposition to his confirmation.

But Mayorkas, in the course his long career inside the federal government, mainly with the Department of Justice, then for eight years with the Department of Homeland Security, is a staunch defender of the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state. He was very much part of the Obama administration's own war against immigrants, the cruelest ever until President Donald Trump surpassed it, including the creation of a vast network of detention camps, inaugurated under Obama and then fully put to use over the past four years.

In mid-2014, the Obama administration decided to

send a strong message to Central Americans attempting to cross into the United States by detaining entire families. A Vox report from June 2014 quotes then-Deputy DHS Secretary Mayorkas as saying that the government was “actively working to secure additional space” where migrant families would be detained “as humanely as possible.” At that point, migrant rights advocates made the obvious argument based on the US’s past experiments with the system that “there’s no way to detain families humanely. It just doesn’t work.” However, that did not preclude the Obama administration from going full-steam ahead.

A year after this program was put into motion, 188 advocacy groups jointly sent a letter to Obama calling for an immediate end to family detention. In words that would sadly be echoed a few years later, they pointed that “prolonged and indefinite” detention “had a traumatic impact on the mental health and physical well-being” of families already traumatized by their experiences in their homelands. And despite promises about providing alternative arrangements for families that had passed a “credible fear” interview, DHS had implemented a wide-ranging “no-bond and no-release” policy. As a result, a large number of migrants who posed no security threat or flight risk were being held by the DHS in “jail-like facilities.”

In the appalling spectacle of the second presidential debate featuring Trump and Biden, arguably the lowest point involved the discussion of immigration and family separations. While Trump’s lack of empathy about the children being held in cages was both striking and horrifying, there was a question that he posed to Biden which went unanswered: “Who built the cages?” This is a question that cannot and should not be shrugged off. The Obama-Biden administration initiated the use of those cages, which the Trump administration continued in an even more shameless, brazen manner. Mayorkas was an important cog in that wheel.

Mayorkas comes with strong recommendations, including from Tom Ridge, the original DHS “czar” appointed by President George W. Bush, who praised him as “an exceptionally fine choice.” Chad Sweet, another DHS official during the Bush years, reiterated his support on the grounds that Mayorkas’ qualifications would appeal to law enforcement. The few doubts expressed by establishment figures have

been more about potential trouble during the confirmation hearings. Mayorkas had already faced some challenges during his previous confirmation hearing in 2013, when his questionable interventions to expedite foreign investors’ visa applications in his role as director of USCIS were brought to light. However, this time around, as Sweet made clear, his Republican colleagues would not consider that a stumbling block.

The reason is that while Biden might be willing to roll back some of the most visibly inhumane aspects of the Trump administration’s war on immigrants, his selection of Mayorkas is a signal to the ruling class that his administration will continue the policies of the Obama administration, which were hardly friendly to immigrants. As vice president, Biden told Guatemalans in 2014: “Those who are pondering risking their lives to reach the United States should be aware of what awaits them. It will not be open arms. ... We’re going to send the vast majority of you back.” The same message is now being sent to all those who are stuck in the detention camps.



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