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He's secured the border. He now has a chance at a larger migrant legacy.

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Trump's Border Success—and Opportunity

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

You wouldn't know it from the lack of coverage, but President Trump has already accomplished one of his top priorities—controlling the U.S. border with Mexico. Now if Mr. Trump wants a more lasting legacy, he has a political opening to lead on legislation that could fix America's broken immigration system well past his four-year term.

As the nearby chart shows, the border turnaround is remarkable, and it happened with equally remarkable speed. According to data released Monday by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 7,181 illegal migrants were detained crossing the Southwest land border in March, while another 3,836 aliens showed up at ports of entry. That total of 11,017 "encounters" compares with 189,359 in March 2024, and it's lower than even during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Border apprehensions shot up shortly after President Biden took office, as he repealed Mr. Trump's first-term policies. Then Mr. Biden abdicated enforcement. Political pressure amid the 2024 election made him change course last June, and border crossings began to drop. Yet the nosedive since vindicates Mr. Trump's view that presidential messaging matters. Potential migrants saw who won in November.

Two days after the election, a Reuters report noted that a migrant caravan in Mexico "had shrunk to about half its original size," shedding 1,400 people. "I had hoped [Kamala Harris] would win, but that didn't happen," a Venezuelan woman told the wire service.

Two months ago New York City said the Roosevelt Hotel in Midtown, which had been the intake site for 173,000 migrants, will quit being used for that purpose by June. The sounds you don't hear anymore after Mr. Biden's exit are complaints by big-city mayors, mostly Democrats, about the influx of migrants they can't afford to house.

This is a big deal, and Mr. Trump hasn't had to be punitive to control the border. The figure for encounters was 11,709 in February, before the White House's current foray in El Salvador. Mr. Trump's main tool is the deterrence of telling migrants not to come because they won't be allowed to stay. He negotiated more cooperation from Mexico, which has helped. He sent troops to the border to help build the wall, but the decline has come even without the wall. One surprise is that Mr. Trump hasn't taken more credit for this accomplishment. Instead he's pressing forward with deportations. Deporting gang members and criminals is popular, but public support drops when it starts to separate families or happens without due process.

The larger question is whether Mr. Trump can use the political capital from his border victory to achieve a more lasting immigration success. That would mean legislation to fix some of the drivers of illegal migration before the next Democratic President takes power.

Some of these problems are well known and not complicated. The initial “credible fear” standard for claiming asylum is too low. The backlogs in the immigration courts are ludicrous. There aren’t enough judges or detention beds. Republicans can address some of these in their budget bill, but a larger reform would need Democratic Senate votes. That would include more pathways for legal immigration to address the labor needs of a growing economy. Half of small businesses say one of their largest problems is finding workers. If Mr. Trump wants more fruits and vegetables grown at home, who’s going to pick them? “Dreamers” brought to the U.S. as children are still being used as political pawns, though a Gallup poll last year said 64% of Republicans and 82% of independents favor giving them a route to citizenship. If Mr. Trump wants Silicon Valley to win the AI race, why are H-1B skilled visas capped at a low number and handed out by lottery?

Mr. Trump seems to understand the need for more imported workers. Last week he suggested the U. S. might help immigrants who self- deport “come back as legal workers.” It isn’t clear how many migrants would trust the government, but this is the right policy direction.

Immigration politics has been poisoned by the past four years of failure. Perhaps Mr. Trump’s success at the border will open an opportunity to forge a larger immigration legacy. It’s worth a try.

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