

The Wilson Times

Our Opinion: Nothing conservative about punishing 'sanctuary cities'

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In his crackdown on illegal immigration, President Donald Trump has taken a hard line with “sanctuary cities,” pledging in an executive order to starve them of grant funding if they refuse to cooperate with federal officials.

The tough talk appeals to many Americans concerned about the presence of undocumented immigrants in their communities. Tighter control on immigration has been a sturdy plank in the Republican Party platform, but in the case of sanctuary cities, it upends centuries of conservative ideology.

Sanctuary cities don't take extraordinary steps to harbor immigrants by hiding them from federal officials. They merely decline voluntary requests to serve as a middleman for immigration agents. It's a form of passive rather than active resistance.

When a person is arrested and booked in a local jail, his or her fingerprints are entered into FBI databases and shared with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. When ICE determines a suspect is undocumented, it can submit a detainer request to jailers asking them to hold the inmate so they can initiate deportation proceedings.

This level of cooperation is standard in many cities and counties. Some see it as a professional courtesy, some want to take an active role in deporting undocumented immigrants and others consider it a waste of resources to hold those who have been booked on petty crimes and would ordinarily be released after a short time.

City and county jails that refuse federal detainers aren't thumbing their noses at the law. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Printz v. United States*, a challenge to the Brady bill background check statute, that state and local governments have no obligation to enforce federal law.

That squares with federalism and states' rights — two legal principles that conservatives have traditionally favored. The immigration debate serves as a glaring exception.

“Conservatives were really on the other side, saying we absolutely have the right as sovereign states to not enforce federal law on behalf of the federal government,” said David Bier, an immigration policy analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute. “It's the exact same situation here.”

While sanctuary cities may favor amnesty or a path to citizenship for those who entered the

United States unlawfully, that isn't their decision to make. Bier explained it comes down to "using the resources of the states and localities how they choose."

We support border security and effective enforcement of U.S. immigration law, but those are burdens the federal government must bear. Trump shouldn't blame cities and states for the feds' failures.

Migrants who come to the U.S. unlawfully are at risk of detection and deportation, but it concerns us that the national conversation is focused on punishing powerless individuals rather than reforming the powerful bureaucracies that failed to stop them from entering.

Trump should reconsider his executive order, as its consequences will rob taxpayers of equipment and services in dozens of American communities.

Federal grants aren't free money. Citizens in sanctuary cities pay their tax to Uncle Sam, and they deserve a return on their investment whether or not local leaders want to be deputized as immigration cops.