

Los Angeles Daily News

Biden stays the course on Trump's immigration, trade and industrial policies

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March 18, 2021

Several of my friends have expressed relief now that Joe Biden is president and Donald Trump is gone. They no longer have to watch the news constantly, declaring that they know “the country is now in good hands.”

There's no way to defend Trump's poor behavior and insulting style. Yet, there is more to a president than his decorum. And on at least three signature Trump policies for which he'll be remembered the most, often with dread, the similarities between Biden and Trump are unsettling.

Take immigration. President Biden campaigned against separating migrant kids from their families at the border. But, sadly, such separations are still happening. In fact, February 2021 recorded a 61% increase over January. As The Wall Street Journal editorialized, “The Washington Post reports that more than 8,500 migrant children are at facilities run by the Department of Health and Human Services, while another 3,500 — ‘the highest figure ever’ — are stuck at CBP stations waiting for a spot to open at the shelters.”

While the Biden administration promised an end to Trump's immigration policies, the sheer number of kids effectively still locked up in deplorable conditions exposes the Biden administration's delayed action — or possibly unwillingness — to reform the underlying policies that drive migrant children to show up unaccompanied at the border.

For starters, families who show up to ask for asylum are sent back, while unaccompanied children who cross the border will get into the country. That's an incentive to send kids alone. Moreover, it's still the policy to separate children from their more distant relatives when they show up at the border. These rules, combined with the large population that has built up over time under Trump, explains part of the increase in these border detentions.

What's more, the Cato Institute's immigration expert David Bier wrote recently that the Biden administration's changes to the “remain in Mexico” policy make the situation even worse. Families that try to cross together are still sent back to Mexico; however, unlike under the Trump administration, they aren't given a court date to make their case for asylum, or any sort of asylum process, for that matter. They are just sent back to wait in Mexico. Wait for what? It's unclear.

Biden seems to have also embraced much of the same Trump trade agenda that many on the left used to criticize as protectionist, politically driven and unnecessarily aggressive toward our trading partners. They were also rightfully critical of his abuse of Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, which authorizes the president to impose tariffs in the name of national security. Unfortunately, so far, Trumpian-style abuses continue under this new administration.

The Cato Institute's Scott Lincicome and Inu Manak note that Biden's first trade action was to reinstate "tariffs on aluminum from the United Arab Emirates under Section 232."

While it's still too early in the administration's term to be sure what will happen next, there are reasons to worry that Biden will not do much to roll back Trump's cronyist protectionism. The new administration has yet to remove Trump's 25% national-security tariffs on most imported steel. Other tariffs also remain in place at the expense of U.S. consumers. The administration says it's reviewing the levies, though there's no guarantee that it will remove them, as it has signaled that it may be as protectionist as the Trump administration. Powerful evidence on this front is Biden's nonsensical "Buy American" policy.

Finally, there's little daylight between the Trump and Biden administrations on industrial policy. While each may come at the issue from different angles, the support for industrial policy offered by Trump, Biden and their followers is very similar. They suffer from the same delusion that it's an innovative idea, or that it will yield different outcomes from when it was tried in the past. It also exhibits pervasive errors in economic thinking and demonstrates an arrogant confidence that bureaucrats have sufficient knowledge to steer the economy in whatever direction they desire.

Biden shares other traits with Trump, such as his fiscal irresponsibility, a willingness to bomb foreign countries and a soft spot for defense spending. So yeah, Trump is gone, but for those still paying attention and still watching the news, we realize that many of his policies are still firmly in place.

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