



Mayorkas fields onslaught of GOP attacks over border

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Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas faced a consistent grind of questions from Republicans who sought to portray the Biden administration as willful agents of chaos and rolled out increasingly personal attacks against a Cabinet secretary who is himself an immigrant.

Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee repeatedly made baseless claims that Mayorkas was “intentionally” seeking to disrupt the border. Several raised the specter that migrants might commit crimes or could even be terrorists.

It was a line of questioning Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.) said sought to “attack and scapegoat immigrants” and that Rep. Val Demings (D-Fla.) said contained “new lows.”

Mayorkas’s appearance before the House Judiciary Committee comes after Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) vowed to grill the secretary about border policy, only to have his 60-page playbook for the hearing uncovered by The New York Times.

GOP lawmakers at the hearing largely stuck to that playbook.

They also directed a number of attacks at Mayorkas directly, with Jordan, the ranking member, asserting that would-be migrants would namecheck Mayorkas when deciding to cross the border.

And in capping a lengthy tirade in which he said Mayorkas “allowed” opioids into the country and was “responsible” for thousands of girls being sold into prostitution, Rep. Ken Buck (R-Colo.) suggested he would go down in infamy as a traitor to the country.

“No parents with the last name Arnold name their kids Benedict,” he said, referencing the defector to the British army.

“What would the Mayorkas family do down the road?” Buck added.

Mayorkas is a relatively unique last name, its spelling often indicating Sephardic Jewish heritage.

“Congressman, I have so much to say in response to what you just said,” Mayorkas replied.

“It is so profoundly offensive, on so many different levels, in so many different regards. I won’t ask you for an apology,” said Mayorkas, rattling off his years of service as a federal prosecutor and Homeland Security official.

Buck cut him off to say, “Don’t.”

Republicans spent ample time asserting that migrants pose an elevated criminal risk — a false claim favored by former President Trump on the campaign trail.

Rep. Greg Steube (R-Fla.), for instance, accurately stated that Texas is one of the few states that keep records on criminality by immigration status, before pelting Mayorkas with a series of statistics on crimes committed by immigrants in the state.

“The latest report from the state of Texas reports that between June 1 of 2011 and November 30 of 2021, 356,000 criminal aliens were booked into Texas jails, of which 243,000 were identified as being in the country illegally,” Steube said.

A Cato Institute working paper published in 2020 using Texas Department of Public Safety data found that the conviction rate for undocumented immigrants in the state was 45 percent lower than for native-born Americans in 2018.

The paper found essentially no correlation between illegal immigration and crime rates in the state between 2012 and 2018.

“Whether one focuses on criminal convictions, arrests, or the number of individuals convicted or arrested, the results are the same: illegal immigrants have a lower crime rate than native-born Americans in Texas,” Cato concluded in the paper.

And while Mayorkas said some who enter the country will “undoubtedly” commit crimes, he noted many who come here are fleeing countries out of fear for their own lives.

“You are describing people seeking asylum in our country with a broad brush of criminality,” he said, later noting that sentiment could be applied to people like his parents, who immigrated with Mayorkas to flee communist Cuba.

Lawmakers also sought to push a narrative that immigrants who commit crimes are not deported by the administration — something Mayorkas also countered.

Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) at one point said Mayorkas should be rounding up migrants “like they were in the Capitol on Jan. 6.”

Under the Biden administration, Homeland Security has prioritized deporting those that have committed serious crimes rather than broadly seeking to remove all undocumented people who are in the country.

Mayorkas said that under his leadership, the department has arrested 12,025 individuals convicted of aggravated felonies, “nearly double the 6,815 arrested in fiscal year 2020,” a figure that includes six months of the pandemic.

Other lawmakers pointed to a handful of crimes committed by Afghan evacuees to falsely assert that Homeland Security did not properly conduct vetting of those who fled the country in the U.S. exit.

Rep. Dan Bishop (R-N.C.) pointed to cases of those on the terror watchlist who were able to enter the country.

“Are you waiting for a mushroom cloud?” he said.

“I won’t dignify that last question with a response,” Mayorkas said.

Several GOP lawmakers at the hearing also correlated immigration with the opiate crisis and the entry of illegal drugs to the United States.

An American Immigration Council analysis of public border enforcement figures from 2018 to 2022 found the majority of seizures of fentanyl and heroin come through cars at ports of entry rather than through clandestine smuggling routes, and drug seizure rates show no correlation with fluctuations in migration.

Rep. David Cicilline (D-R.I.) told Mayorkas there was a reason “why you’re not being allowed to answer questions by my colleagues on the other side of the aisle or why they’re not interested in your reference to data.”

“They’re not interested in that because they have a 60-page memo prepared by the ranking member of this committee, as reported in the newspaper. That’s a memo that includes misleading and provocative talking points that seek to portray migrants and refugees as perpetrators of gruesome crimes,” he said.

“There’s a whole plan about what this hearing is about,” he added. “And it’s about creating Fox News spots that they can use for politics, and I regret that you have to be part of it.”

Rep. Veronica Escobar (D-Texas), who hails from El Paso and is one of the few members of the committee from a border district, said the talking points were an attempt to “feed our national a regular diet of hate and rage because that’s what they believe will win them elections,” something she said degrades her GOP colleagues.

Democrats also pushed back on GOP touting of Trump border policies.

“The previous administration did all it could to break our immigration system,” House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler (D-N.Y.) said.

“However, it is important to remember that the previous administration also did everything within its power to block legal pathways to our immigration system,” he added. “The Trump Administration virtually shut down our nation’s refugee program, implemented a Muslim Ban, and brought immigration benefits processing to a crawl, nearly bankrupting U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and implementing policies that resulted in historically high processing delays.”

Mayorkas’s appearance Thursday was his third and final appearance on Capitol Hill this week. But Democrats said GOP lawmakers’ eagerness to hit him with questions wasn’t as apparent when they were invited to a private briefing Tuesday night.

“When they had the ability to ask questions of the secretary – this is how you know it’s political theater — one Republican, one single Republican had a question,” Rep. Nanette Diaz Barragán said.