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## Central American policy tests Granger, White House relationship

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WASHINGTON-Rep. Kay Granger, once a critic of President Donald Trump, sees long-time friend John Kelly as a force of discipline in an otherwise disorganized White House. But two months into Kelly's new role as chief of staff, that friendship's clout is about to be tested, as the White House weighs a new policy on an issue where he and the Texas Republican worked closely together – how to deal with Central American children crossing the U.S. border.

Granger is passionate about the issue. In 2014 she pushed then-House Speaker John Boehner to create a congressional task force which she chaired. She traveled to Guatemala with Kelly, then commander of the U.S. Southern Command, to assess the situation.

She later took on her own party by urging leaders to treat the tens of thousands of children coming across the border as a humanitarian crisis, and pushed to provide U.S. aid aimed at stopping the violence in their home countries. That put her at odds with some conservatives, who hoped to use the opportunity to enact a host of other hard-line immigration proposals.

Granger recently touted her relationship with Kelly. "The chief of staff of the president is a very good friend of mine," she said. "I worked with him when we went into Iraq, on women's issues, and again after that on undocumented children coming across the border."

But Kelly works in a White House that's taken a hard stance on immigration.

Granger's issue is back in the spotlight. A new proposal, driven by Attorney General Jeff Sessions, would fast-track deportation of some 15,000 Central American teens back to their home countries. They would not be able to plead their case before an immigration judge first.

While Granger has long advocated for sending the teens back, she and Kelly were united on the need to also address violence back in their home countries. The White House's proposal so far hasn't mentioned any plans for that.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment. Kelly has not spoken publicly about the plan.

Whether Kelly can influence this issue could test how much sway he has in a White House that's favored immigration hardliners. It will also play a pivotal role in whether the White House can keep the confidence of Granger, an 11-term congresswoman and the state's only Republican woman in Congress. Trump is only now winning her over.

Granger endorsed Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, in the 2016 Republican presidential primary race. She never did endorse Trump, and in October, she called on him to drop out, after tapes revealed lewd comments he'd made about women in 2005.

Asked to assess his presidency at a gathering of Wise County Republicans at the Decatur Civic Center in Texas last month, Granger instead stressed her trust in Kelly, describing work they'd done together on a variety of issues, including the crisis of children crossing the border.

"[Kelly's] the chief of staff now and I talked to him yesterday," Granger said at the event.

Just weeks into his new role at that point, Granger said Kelly had already brought "discipline" to an administration that often changed policy goals at a moment's notice. In the call, Granger said she and Kelly discussed his role in fixing what she saw as a dysfunctional relationship between the White House and Congress.

"I said, 'I know you'll help our president and pull this together,'" Granger recalled of the conversation with Kelly. "I'll be a part of that, because I want it to work, and I want the Congress to work with the president."

Granger's office declined to weigh in on the White House's new plan for Central American teens before seeing the full details. In a statement provided to the *Star-Telegram*, though, she reiterated many of her hopes for taking a humanitarian approach.

"This is an incredibly important issue and I cannot speculate on a plan which has not been fully developed," Granger said in the statement.

"I strongly believe that the best solution was to send the children home to their families as quickly as possible," she said, echoing the plan's basic premise.

But, she added, "To do that we needed to help address the crime and violence caused by the criminals and drug cartels in their home countries."

Many Democrats and humanitarian groups disagreed with that assessment, suggesting the children crossing the border should be eligible for asylum. The Obama White House in 2014 focused its efforts on increasing resources to house the refugees and process asylum cases in court.

Other Democrats and some Republicans suggested changing the law to allow the children from Central America to be sent back more quickly, matching the policy the U.S. has with Mexico.

“The middle-ground Republican solution is to more rapidly deport the folks who come across the border by using our deportation agreements with Mexico as a basis for new agreements with Central American countries,” said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy expert at the Libertarian Cato Institute. “That was the obvious solution for folks who didn’t want drastic changes to the system but also didn’t want these asylees to stay.”

Granger, who led the task force and chaired the House’s State and Foreign Operations appropriations subcommittee at the time, tried to bring conservatives in her party around to that idea by also dedicating money and resources to increase border security and combat human trafficking.

“My task force investigated the issue in-person, on our southern border, and in the countries of Honduras and Guatemala,” said Granger. “We needed to find out why so many parents were risking the lives of their children to send them on the long dangerous trip to the U.S. The answer we got from the parents was they genuinely feared for their children’s lives if they didn’t leave.”

Many members of Granger’s party wanted to take their response further.

Sessions, along with Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, had criticized Granger’s proposal, pushing instead to use the issue to defund Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which they said created the crisis in the first place.

Citing the border wall and proposed cuts to legal immigration as examples, Nowrasteh said Trump’s immigration policy has so-far been driven by hard-liners. They could steer policy on Central American children the same direction. That could mean deporting them back to their countries without addressing the violence they tried to escape – something Granger continues to push for.

Granger declined to be interviewed for this story.