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First a parade, now border control: Trump is abusing the military

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President Trump's repeated references to "my generals" is telling. He remains oblivious to the principle that the generals work for *America*, and take an oath to uphold the *Constitution*. He delights in the presence of men in uniform and tries to mimic what he imagines their language must sound like. But in substantive ways, he shows them little respect. The military, as far as Trump is concerned, is simply another venue from which to throw red meat to his low-information base.

The president wanted to bring back torture, until Defense Secretary Jim Mattis talked him out of it. He is willing to waste military funds and time on a parade because he liked the one he watched in France. He is willing to disrupt morale and operations by barring transgender people from serving. He still has not visited the military at a combat zone. And now he proposes to deploy it (or the National Guard, it seems) to the border.

The Cato Institute's Alex Nowrasteh explains why this is a perfectly awful idea:

President Trump has ordered troops to the border to help the current number of 19,437 Border Patrol agents apprehend the roughly 1,000 Central American asylum seekers who are slowly making their way north (but probably won't make it all the way to the border). There are currently about 19 Border Patrol agents for each Central American asylum-seeker in this caravan. In 2017, Border Patrol apprehended about 360,000 illegal immigrants or about 18 per Border Patrol agents over the entire year, which works out to one apprehension per Border Patrol agents every 20 days. By that measure, Border Patrol agents in 1954 individually apprehended an average of 53 *times* as many illegal immigrants as Border Patrol agents did in 2017. If the current caravan makes it to the United States border, it would add about a single day's worth of apprehensions. Border Patrol should be able to handle this comparatively small number of asylum seekers without military aid as they have done so before many times.

So why is the president doing this? It's part and parcel of Trump's temper tantrum, figuratively and literally at the military's expense, for getting fleeced on the spending deal. He did not get his wall — which Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) had offered him — so instead he'll move troops to the border! Huh?

As Nowrasteh observes, it is “unclear what the troops will actually accomplish on the border. Since the members of the caravan intend to surrender to Border Patrol or Customs Officers and ask for asylum, the troops serve no purpose. They will not deter asylum seekers. Border Patrol agents are not overwhelmed by entries even though they constantly plead poverty in an effort to capture more taxpayer resources. The most likely explanation for the proposed deployment is politics, just like the previous deployments.” And the Mexican government has reportedly halted the caravan anyway.

In short, since there is no surge in illegal immigration — despite Trump’s continued claims to the contrary — neither the wall nor the military is needed. Nowrasteh writes: “From about 1970 through 2006, the Border Patrol faced an annual inflow of illegal immigrants far in excess of anything in recent years yet President Trump has decided that this is the time to put troops on the border.”

Former auto industry czar Steven Rattner explained: “As a result of a number of factors – better enforcement, a stronger economy in Mexico and the like – illegal border crossings have been dropping steadily for nearly two decades, from a peak of nearly 1.65 million to just over 300,000 last year.”

Moreover, the number of people leaving the United States to return to Mexico has soared. “Between 1998 and 2000, net Mexican migration into the United States totaled more than 2.2 million,” Rattner pointed out. “Since 2005, more Mexicans have left the United States than have arrived. A principal reason for this appears to have been the financial crisis and ensuing recession, which reduced the job opportunities in the United States.”

At the same time, the Mexican economy has been improving, providing more and better jobs south of the border than was historically the case. In 2015, Pew Research found that “from 2009 to 2014, 1 million Mexicans and their families (including U.S.-born children) left the U.S. for Mexico, according to data from the 2014 Mexican National Survey of Demographic Dynamics. U.S. census data for the same period show an estimated 870,000 Mexican nationals left Mexico to come to the U.S., a smaller number than the flow of families from the U.S. to Mexico.”

The National Immigration Forum reiterated this point in a written statement. “The purported sense of urgency, however, is misplaced — net immigration from Mexico is negative, and prior to this week’s statements the administration frequently touted the decrease in border crossings that puts Border Patrol arrests at a 46-year low. And of the unauthorized immigrants arriving in the U.S. in the past decade, the majority have arrived via ports of entry rather than via illegal border crossings that a border wall could prevent.”

So why do we need a wall or the military? We don’t. Like his misunderstanding of the trade deficit, Trump doesn’t know or care to know what the real border situation is. He built his political base primarily on anti-immigrant white grievance and he’ll keep going back to the well of xenophobia no matter the facts. Mattis, however, doesn’t have to put up with this. He can tell the president — and Congress — that using troops in this fashion puts unnecessary strain on forces elsewhere. (Even if it is National Guard forces deployed, they are then not available for other duties including relieving regular military personnel.) In other words, Trump’s misuse of

the military hurts those putting their lives on the line, and adds to the burden felt by military families. If he really cared for the troops, Trump would stop treating them as pawns in his noxious brand of populism.