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## Biden's Chance to End Border Chaos

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Some 8,000 Honduran asylum seekers tried to get up a welcoming party of sorts for President Joe Biden this month. Their effort to reach the U.S. southern border in at least two caravans was repelled thanks to agreements that President Trump made with Mexico and Guatemala to use force to intercept illegal aliens. But Central America remains a simmering cauldron of would-be migrants desperate to work in the U.S.

Mr. Biden now has to come up with his own strategy. More resources at the border to process applicants could help. But without new incentives for migrants to follow the law, the U.S. will remain heavily dependent on the militarization of immigration policy in Guatemala and Mexico to contain the inevitable flows of illegal aliens.

The Hondurans seem to have concluded logically that with the Democrats in power again, Trump-era restrictions on asylum were sure to be lifted. Yet on Jan. 17 NBC News reported that a senior Biden transition official said its message to the migrants was that this “is not the time to make the journey.” That same official also said they “need to understand they’re not going to be able to come into the United States immediately.”

Nice words of warning did nothing to discourage the migrants who had set out on Jan. 15. By Jan. 18 they were engaged in violent confrontations with Guatemalan National Guard and national police. Mothers in tears sat on the ground holding their children while young men blocked roads, threw stones, and tried to push their way past law enforcement.

Reports from the front say that thousands were turned back. My sources say the rest have broken into smaller groups that continue to move north. The White House said over the weekend that Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador —known as AMLO—has agreed to keeping working to “curb the flow” of illegal aliens from Central America in Mexico. If they make it to the U.S. border the Biden administration has warned that processing priority will go to those already waiting in the asylum queue.

When Americans think back on the southern border chaos during the Trump years, they may remember best the family separations, which resulted from the April 2018 decision by U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions to arrest any adult crossing the border illegally. Family separations occurred in 2017 as well, but Mr. Sessions’ “zero tolerance” policy made the situation acute.

Yet the family-separation policy, lasting less than three months, didn't reduce migration flows. The numbers began to recede in 2019 when the transactional Mr. Trump got assistance from AMLO and Guatemalan Presidents Jimmy Morales and Alejandro Giammattei. Both governments committed to help the U.S. deter the cavalcades. The Trump administration ruled that migrants had to claim asylum in the first foreign country they entered on their way north. AMLO further agreed to a Department of Homeland Security innovation known as the Migrant Protection Protocols. Asylum seekers had to "remain in Mexico" while they awaited the processing of their applications.

Covid-19 restrictions put in place last year at the U.S. border remain, allowing for the immediate expulsion of illegal crossers. But last week Mr. Biden signed an executive order to end remain-in-Mexico protocols—as he promised during the campaign. The signal sent is one of a more liberal policy toward weary, destitute migrants claiming asylum.

This isn't a good solution even if Mr. Biden's heart is in the right place. Let's remember that President Obama also faced chaos caused by asylum seekers in 2014, which led to the construction of chain-linked pens to detain migrants in groups: mothers with children, teenage boys, etc. Those pens were later dubbed "cages" when the Trump administration used them to hold children separated from guardians under "zero tolerance."

Mr. Biden wants a more humane approach to immigration than either of his predecessors. Yet he avoided border bedlam this month only because Mexico and Guatemala did the dirty work. Unless he plans to rely on those tactics in the long term, he needs a plan to deal, in an orderly fashion, with the large numbers of Central Americans who are fleeing violence and poverty in search of a better life.

The only answer to this quandary is to open more legal pathways. Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration analyst at the Cato Institute, recommends an increase in the number of H-2 guest-worker visas for Central Americans since many asylum claimants are really migrants looking for work. When this was done for Mexico, Mr. Nowrasteh noted in July 2019, there was a corresponding drop in illegal immigration.

Greater opportunity to work legally would break the vicious circle behind the chaos, and calm the fears that arise from what looks like a threat to U.S. national security. As Mr. Nowrasteh told me last week, "You can only open if there is public confidence that things are under control. But you can only get things under control by opening."

Your move, Mr. Biden.