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Trump invokes Eisenhower's deportation of illegal immigrants in 1950s

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Real estate mogul Donald Trump recently reiterated his proposal to deport the country's illegal immigrants

History indicates his plan would work, Trump said at the Republican presidential debate in Milwaukee, Wis.

"Let me just tell you that Dwight Eisenhower, good president, great president, people liked him. 'I like Ike,' right?" Trump said in the Nov. 10 debate hosted by Fox Business Network. "Moved 1.5 million illegal immigrants out of this country, moved them just beyond the border. They came back. Moved them again beyond the border, they came back. Didn't like it. Moved them way south. They never came back."

Eisenhower did oversee a 1950s campaign that deported undocumented immigrants. But did he really move that many in one operation?

Beginning in World War II — during a severe shortage of workers on the home front — the federal government instituted the Bracero program, which brought Mexican workers into the United States to fill jobs that would not otherwise be filled. The Braceros were in the country legally, but the government often looked the other way when companies illegally brought their own Mexican workers into the country.

In 1954, workers brought in outside the Bracero program, combined with Mexicans who had crossed the border illegally on their own, were the targets. The intention was to target illegal immigrants, though some U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry were also caught up in the dragnet.

Determining the number of people who were deported in the operation is tricky because some people who would have otherwise been subject to deportation were expected to leave the country "voluntarily" (or self-deportation). We came across estimates of forced removals ranging from 250,000 to 1.3 million.

"The (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service) claimed as many as 1.3 million, though the number officially apprehended did not come anywhere near this total," according to the Texas State Historical Association's online handbook, produced in partnership with the University of Texas at Austin.

The case of California is a good example. The INS (which was reorganized out of existence in 2003) said 540,000 people were to be deported from California alone during the campaign, said

Don Mitchell, a geography professor at Syracuse University. But at least 485,000 would have had to deport themselves, and there's no evidence that they actually returned to Mexico in those numbers.

Kelly Lytle Hernandez, a history professor at the University of California Los Angeles, puts the maximum number of people actually deported during the operation at 250,000. The vast majority of the program took place during fiscal year 1955, which registered just about 254,000 apprehensions total, she wrote in a 2010 report.

What about Trump's point that authorities deported people to more southern locations in Mexico to stop them from easily re-entering the United States?

In earlier 20th century immigration control efforts, Border Patrol found that deporting immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border allowed them to easily cross back into the United States, according to Hernandez's paper. Starting in the 1940s, the United States would take deportees to the border, and from there Mexican authorities would take them to the country's interior either by train or boat, primarily. This continued, so Trump has a bit of a point there.

But attempts to relocate people to the Mexican interior did not always stop them from returning to the United States, Mitchell said. Many returned illegally or legally as guest workers.

"It is absolutely the case that sending folks to the interior did not stop them from returning," he said. "It might be the case that some were discouraged, but others returned."

Further, the operation was more about policy changes that actually allowed more opportunities for immigrants to gain legal status through work visas than it was about deportation, Hernandez told PolitiFact.

The campaign would have been "a complete failure" had it not been for the guest worker program that accompanied it, wrote Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Nowrasteh noted that low levels of undocumented immigration in the 1950s was more likely a result of the guest worker program, rather than the 1954 deportation campaign. The guest worker program ended in 1965.

"On the whole, though, Trump's comments are undoubtedly an exaggeration and a bit of a twist on the facts," Mitchell said.

Our ruling

Trump said President Eisenhower "moved 1.5 million illegal immigrants out of this country."

Trump is referring to a 1954 campaign to deport illegal immigrants. While the idea that the operation resulted in more than 1 million deportations is not pulled out of thin air, historians widely cite that number as far too high for a variety of reasons — including the fact that hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants would have had to self-deport.

We rate Trump's claim Half True.