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Steve Chapman: The real causes of the border crisis, and the real remedies

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In 2014, the Obama administration was faced with a surge in unaccompanied minors from Central America showing up at our border and seeking asylum. In an effort to reduce the number of kids trekking across Mexico, it created a program to let them apply for asylum in their home countries. Some 13,000 did, helping to ease the rush.

You can guess what happened next. Donald Trump became president and acted on his twin beliefs: anything that Barack Obama did was bad, and anything that helped foreigners was worse. He killed the program, and soon the number of Central American kids crossing over began to grow. By the spring of 2019, his administration was faced with its very own crisis at the border.

His Department of Homeland Security responded with harsh measures — separating children from parents in large numbers, expelling children from Central America into Mexico and forcing asylum seekers to remain for months in Mexico in squalid camps.

Today, we see another tide of Central Americans coming north, and Republicans blame President Joe Biden for enticing them. They refer to it as “Biden’s border crisis,” as though it suddenly exploded on Jan. 20.

In fact, it emerged when the White House was just a gleam in Mr. Biden’s eye. The increase began last spring and built steadily over the remainder of Mr. Trump’s presidency. From May to October, the number of “southwest land border encounters” recorded by U.S. Customs and Border Patrol nearly tripled. In truth, it was dire conditions in their home countries that drove the migrants.

Republicans claim they were emboldened by Mr. Biden’s plan to stop work on Mr. Trump’s border wall — the one Mexico was supposed to pay for. That theory is implausible, because Mr. Trump added only 47 miles of barriers in places that didn’t have them before.

“Only a few miles were built in South Texas, the area most prone to illegal crossings,” The New York Times recently reported. “Instead, much of the construction, especially in the Trump administration’s closing days, has taken place in remote parts of Arizona where crossings in recent years have been relatively uncommon.”

If Mr. Biden deserves any responsibility for the recent surge, it’s not because of what he did wrong but because of what he did right. Mr. Trump’s fondness for systematic cruelty may have discouraged some Central Americans. But the cruelty was impossible to justify, even for an ostensibly good purpose.

Under Mr. Trump's zero tolerance policy, thousands of children were taken from their parents when the families crossed the border to exercise their right to seek political asylum. Most of the parents were sent back to their home countries. Some of the kids spent weeks sleeping on the floor in chain-link cages. Last fall, we learned the horrifying truth that the Trump administration had lost track of the parents of 545 children, making it impossible to reunite the families.

The brutality was a design feature. Mr. Trump's White House Chief of Staff John Kelly boasted that "a big name of the game is deterrence." But sometimes deterrence asks too much.

There are alternative remedies, such as letting more foreigners in through authorized channels. But Mr. Trump was against immigration of any sort. His administration virtually eliminated admissions for refugees, and last year it slashed the number of green cards for legal permanent residents.

Today, the worldwide backlog of applications for green cards is at 5 million. Many recipients have to wait 10 years or more to be admitted. Cato Institute analysts David Bier and Alex Nowrasteh reach this startling conclusion: "At no time in American history has immigration been as legally restricted as it is currently."

For the moment, the Biden administration has the task of coping with the border crisis while dismantling the inhumane practices of its predecessor. In the longer term, it could relieve pressure on the border by increasing refugee admissions and allotting more slots to the Central American countries that have produced so many migrants.

It could create a program for guest workers from Mexico and Central America, as proposed by Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. Mr. Biden has already moved to restore the Central American Minors Program to provide "a safe, legal, and orderly alternative to the risks incurred in the attempt to migrate to the United States irregularly."

Giving people an avenue to come here legally in order to keep them from coming illegally? A crazy idea, but it just might work.