

SALON

Trump White House steps up its attack on legal immigrants

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Having pretty much cemented its campaign against undocumented immigrants with ICE raids, family separations at the border and demands for a Wall on the southern border, the White House is now focusing its weaponry on legal immigration.

Turning its back on generations of immigrants who have built this country on their manual and intellectual labors, the Trump team is moving full steam to limit legal immigration levels and to force temporary residents to self-deport.

NBC reported earlier this week that the Trump administration is expected to issue a proposal in coming weeks that would make it harder for legal immigrants to become citizens or get green cards if they have ever used a range of popular public benefit programs, including Obamacare. NBC News quoted four unnamed sources with knowledge of the plans.

The pursuit of such limits should alarm Republican congressmen as well as Democrats, but the silence so far is overwhelming.

But here's the kicker: The plan is being hatched with regulations that do not need congressional approval. In fact, the White House would specifically seek to avoid congressional review.

Under the leadership of White House senior adviser Stephen Miller, Trump would use a variety of tools to limit the number of migrants who obtain legal status in the United States each year. Details of the rulemaking proposal are still being completed, but based on a recent draft seen last week and described to NBC News, immigrants living legally in the United States who have ever used or whose household members have ever used Obamacare, children's health insurance, food stamps and other benefits could be hindered from obtaining legal status.

Just to remind us, buying into health insurance is not "welfare." In my mind, treating those who would protect themselves with the legally available form of Obamacare as gifters is obnoxious. The point of food stamps, housing subsidies and other benefit programs are meant to help those not yet making it to have the stability to do so.

The idea is that America now only wants immigrants who can guarantee that they would be self-supporting. That apparently is the new definition of “merit” that Trump uses as a standard for legal immigration.

A Washington Post Plum Line commentary noted this week: “Republicans become deeply offended when you suggest that their party is in the process of adopting a white nationalist agenda, and that many of their voters are motivated by xenophobia. No no, they say, we acknowledge that America is a nation of immigrants; we just want a secure border and all the laws to be enforced. We welcome *legal* immigrants; it’s *illegal* immigration we have a problem with.”

But now a broad-based attack on legal immigration threatens that façade. “So much for the idea that Republicans only want to eliminate illegal. Trump — who, let’s not forget, got elected by saying he’d ban Muslims from entering the country and build a wall on our southern border — is following through on his vision, and that of people like Stephen Miller, that America should no longer welcome immigrants and kick out as many of those who are already here as they can.”

- Already, the administration has seriously reduced the number of green cards it grants each year. The number of green card holders being granted citizenship has been cut.
- The number of legal immigrants a year was reduced by more than half to 45,000 last year. Trump has now proposed cutting that number in half. Of course, he also has asked for H-1 temporary work visas for seasonal workers at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida.
- The Department of Justice is rewriting asylum rules to eliminate domestic and gang violence as grounds for consideration, a move that has drawn a legal challenge from the ACLU.
- The administration has stepped up ICE raids on immigrants who have been in the country for years, has sought to end the DACA (Deferred Action against Childhood Arrivals) program and has supported the idea of separating children, including infants, from migrant families.

Taken along with constant and repeated public harangues against sanctuary cities, political opponents wrongly tagged with supporting open borders, fake charges of widespread voter fraud involving illegal immigrants, targeting those from majority-Muslim countries from being able to travel to the United States, there is little doubt that there is sincerity in the contempt that Trump, Miller and the White House crowd have for immigrants.

Linked to public statements describing originating countries of color as “shitholes” when compared with, say, Norway, and other incidents involving antipathy against nonwhites, it is an easy jump to conclude that the White House finds these racially insensitive remarks part of a campaign to appeal to a populist need for scapegoats for those lagging in the nation’s prosperity.

As to the benefits issue, a recent Cato Institute study found that “immigrants are less likely to consume welfare benefits and, when they do, they generally consume a lower dollar value of benefits than native-born Americans.”

“Trump knows that he has to keep feeding his base red meat on immigration, and one of the benefits of this policy is that it wouldn’t require congressional approval. Another benefit is that it can easily play into the misconceptions and prejudices Americans already hold,” argued Plum Line. “The NBC story used the word ‘welfare’ when referring to programs like food stamps, the Affordable Care Act, and the Children’s Health Insurance Program. As it happens, extensive research has shown that term is racially charged and turns people against whatever policy you’re using it to refer to. The strategy is clear: portray legal immigrants as a drain on the system, taking advantage of hard-working people like you.”

The wider argument holds that the White House wants the November elections to be about immigration, which is why Trump broadly paints the fight as supporters of a wall against Democrats who want open borders and who invite crime by immigrant gangs.

Regardless of political orientation, we all should be able to agree that legal immigration has been a strength for this country. The White House should back off.