

# BUSINESS INSIDER

## **From fear-mongering about asylum seekers at the border to preemptively accusing Afghan refugees of terrorism, the GOP's rhetoric on people coming to America puts lives at risk**

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More and more, it feels like one of the defining features of reporting on refugees and asylum-seekers is tackling misinformation — confronting the untruths, misconceptions, and lies that exist about refugees, asylum-seekers, and immigrants. When I'm on the Mexican border embedded with families fleeing violence, I read tweets accusing them of being gang members; when I talk with mothers in ICE detention, I get emails ranting about MS-13.

I tend to keep an unhappy peace with this misinformation and fear-mongering — "things I can't change" and all that — but this last month I've struggled to contain my anger and my fear. The way powerful people talk, loudly and openly, about refugees isn't just untrue or cynical; it's putting lives in danger — from Afghan refugees to asylum-seekers on the border — in a very real way.

### **At the Southern border**

In early August, I went to a church in San Francisco's Mission District, a Latino capital, to spend time with my thoughts. It was the second anniversary of the massacre in El Paso, where a white gunman went to kill people like me in an act of terrorism motivated by, in his words, "the Hispanic invasion of Texas." When I left the church, my phone began buzzing: A friend was asking about news reports of police and National Guard from red states being sent to the Texas border.

In June, Texas Governor Greg Abbott and Arizona Governor Doug Ducey sent a letter to all 48 other states requesting they send armed personnel to the border "in defense of our sovereignty and territorial integrity." During a press conference announcing the request, Abbott claimed "homes are being invaded," and his Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick went even further saying, "We are being invaded."

Hearing Texan elected officials opine against immigration isn't anything new, and it's not something I begrudge them. Abbott and Patrick were elected by a largely anti-immigration electorate in their party, and they're representing them well. A politician can argue against immigration without putting anyone in active danger. But both of these leaders should know the dangers of using language like "invasion" — especially Abbott.

After meeting with El Paso community members after citizens of his state were slaughtered in 2019, Abbott issued a rare admission of guilt. Just the day before the El Paso massacre, Abbott's campaign sent out a fundraising email calling on Texan citizens to "DEFEND" the border and claiming that Democrats were trying to "transform" Texas "through illegal immigration." Abbott's call to action was echoed, eerily and disturbingly, in the El Paso shooter's manifesto, which ranted about the "great replacement" — a white supremacist conspiracy theory that elites in Europe and the US are trying to "replace" white people with immigrants of color.

After talking with El Paso community leaders about the threats posed by "dangerous rhetoric," Abbott admitted that "mistakes were made," and said that he and his campaign would correct the course.

But Abbott is facing re-election this year, and his commitment to do better seems to have been replaced with his desire for re-election. While there is a real problem on the Texas border — a large number of people have begun arriving in a very specific area, in the Rio Grande Valley, stressing local resources — Abbott should know he has a serious and solemn responsibility when he speaks publicly on the issue. He can't hyperbolize or exaggerate. He can't use the language of invasion, or any of its synonyms. Even when used as a metaphor, that language is a call to arms, a call to action. It's the same twisted belief that Texas is facing an "invasion" that sent a gunman to murder people in a Walmart. We need to be clear: This is not a national security crisis, it's a humanitarian crisis.

**The same language harms Afghans fleeing the Taliban**

There's a through-line that exists from "invasion" rhetoric targeting Latin Americans to the currency hysteria over Afghan refugees and potential terrorism. The El Paso shooter's manifesto was not a one-off; it exists within a loosely associated group of white supremacists, united by online conspiracy theories and alarmist rhetoric.

The El Paso shooter was himself directly inspired by the Christchurch, New Zealand terrorist, who shot 51 predominantly Muslim people to death in two mosques. Just as the El Paso shooter feared that Latin American immigrants were "invading" the US, the Christchurch murderer found motivation in virulent Islamophobia and the deranged fear that Muslims were seeking to replace the white majority in New Zealand. His manifesto's title — "The Great Replacement" — is itself a reference to a theory developed by the French extremist thinker Renauld Camus, who coined the term in 2012.

Today, that same set of "great replacement" theories — explicitly in white supremacist spaces, and implicitly in anti-immigrant politicians' offices — are driving opposition to Afghan refugees resettling in the US and those still trying to make it here after fleeing the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban.

Former senior advisor to Donald Trump, Stephen Miller, offered a reliably anti-refugee take during the effort to evacuate Afghans who had aided the US during the war effort. Miller posted a long Twitter thread claiming the US didn't owe anything to Afghans, arguing against an "immigration policy that has brought the threat of jihadism inside our shores."

"Some arrivals don't assimilate. Others hold more extreme beliefs. Some blame the host country for what happened to their home. Sometimes 2nd or 3rd generation becomes radicalized," Miller wrote. (To date, there has not been a single fatal terrorist attack committed by a refugee in the United States. Researchers at the Cato Institute estimate that an American's chance of dying in an attack committed by a refugee on any given year is 1 in 3.86 billion.)

GOP Senator Tom Cotton, after accusing Biden of failing to evacuate Afghans, suddenly changed his tone once Afghans began arriving in the US, worrying out loud that refugees would not "accept our way of life here in terms of constitutional government."

Politicians should certainly be talking about how to best help Afghans resettle. Last week, I spoke with an Afghan father in California who is struggling to find housing for himself and his young children. More attention must be paid to how best to help these new arrivals make a home here. However, Cotton's useless dithering about assimilation is dangerous. His language connects

with strong, coherent sentiments already in the air in the US, which pushed extremists to murder Muslims multiple times in recent years.

In 2019 alone, there were more than 500 attacks on Muslims in the US — arsonists targeted multiple mosques, and a man in California plowed his car into a group of people he assumed were Muslim, putting an middle school girl into a coma. Since 2010, there have been three different bombings or at temped bombings targeting Muslims. Anti-Muslim attacks have also claimed Indian, Sikh, and Orthodox Jewish victims, when attackers mistakenly assumed they were Muslims.

If leaders like Cotton are going to discuss the integration of refugees, they have to take responsibility for their words and speak with sensitivity to the extraordinary violence refugees and Muslim of all backgrounds can face in this country. If conservatives are serious about preventing terrorism on US soil, they should consider that white supremacist violence has taken far more lives in recent years than any terrorism associated with Islam.

Likewise, when it comes to the border, politicians like Abbott have a right to argue in favor of decreased immigration and increased border enforcement. But they can do that without issuing a call to arms to white supremacists.