



At DHS, Kelly toed the Trump line

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On March 20, then-Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly convened a town hall meeting with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) employees amid a tug of war between the administration and federal courts over President Donald Trump's twice-blocked travel ban.

The nearly 15-year-old department is a sometimes awkward mélange of hard-power law enforcement agencies like U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and civilian outfits like USCIS, whose mission is to ensure that vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers are vetted and have a pathway into the country.

At the time, refugee and asylum officers at USCIS felt their vetting work - a lengthy process that involves extensive data cross-checks and in-depth interviews in collaboration with the State Department, the U.N. refugee agency (UNHCR), and the FBI - was under attack. The travel ban, initially rolled out in Trump's first week in office, attempted to block travelers from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen for 90 days while vetting procedures were reviewed.

Trump had long been hammering calls for an "extreme vetting" upgrade, arguing that the current system was woefully outdated and might let potential terrorists disguised as refugees slip through. Critics said the ban was a discriminatory overreach of executive power, with no clear national security purpose. As the court battles raged, many refugee officers tasked with conducting interviews with would-be asylum-seekers at UNHCR refugee camps in Jordan, Kenya, and other countries were brought back to the United States and relocated to support asylum processing at the U.S.-Mexico border.

USCIS employees received little reassurances from their chief at the town hall. One employee asked Kelly, a retired Marine Corps general, "What do they think we're doing wrong?" Another invited him to visit them in the field to observe their vetting procedures.

"You can improve any program," Kelly replied, without going into specifics. He said he would try to find a time to visit.

Kelly seemed, according to the person who attended the event, like he didn't appreciate what the roughly 700-strong refugee and asylum corps did or even know where they were stationed. "We got the sense there was contempt," the employee said. The visit was never planned, a spokesperson for DHS confirmed.

As Kelly, Trump's newly appointed chief of staff, moves to bring order to a fractious White House, he has also raised hopes that his presence may serve to head off some of the administration's recently floated hard-line proposals, especially when it comes to immigration. But while Kelly may hold different views from his boss, his brief tenure as DHS secretary suggests that he will fall in line with Trump's political priorities.

"John Kelly wasn't brought in to lead. He was brought in to make administration officials who step out of line bleed - [Anthony] Scaramucci being the first cut," Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, said.

Kelly's arrival at the White House just a few months into Trump's term is the latest upheaval for an administration defined by strong personalities with competing agendas. Kelly hit the ground running, immediately firing Anthony Scaramucci, briefly the White House communications director. He also moved to impose a strict hierarchy: He told White House staff that he expects every piece of information or proposed meeting to pass through the chief of staff's desk before making it to the president.

While he has already shaken up the West Wing, he appears unlikely to play a role in steering the Trump agenda on a more moderate course.

"His public comments suggest that he is fully on board with Trump's hard-line approach to immigration, with the exception of the border wall," Rosa Brooks, a senior fellow at New America, said. "There is no particular reason to think that he's going to be pushing back on [Trump's agenda]."

When he took over the reins at Homeland Security, Kelly appeared to hold more nuanced views on immigration than Trump and his inner circle, like chief strategist Stephen Bannon, senior adviser Stephen Miller, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions. In his confirmation hearing and in hearings before Congress, Kelly repeatedly downplayed the importance of a physical border wall at the southern U.S. border. Instead, he talked up helping to stabilize Central American countries, expressed support for people brought to the United States illegally as children, and openly disagreed with Trump's perception of Muslims as natural security risks.

Behind the scenes, he tried to deter the president from moving forward with some of the harshest travel ban policies. He also put his foot down against the appointment of Trump adviser Kris Kobach, an aggressive immigration hard-liner, as his deputy and repeatedly flew to Mexico to reassure nervous partners in the drug war.

Yet Kelly also worked to implement Trump's immigration plans, especially in ramping up deportation enforcement.

"He has had plenty of opportunities to try to humanize or soften or ameliorate Trump's approach to immigration, and plenty of opportunities to send messages about how ICE agents should be using good judgment," Brooks said. "But he hasn't done so. In light of that, I assume he is fully supportive both of what Trump has been saying and of what DHS employees have been doing during his time as DHS secretary."

When the administration reportedly blindsided Kelly with the sudden rollout of the travel ban on Jan. 27, he publicly supported and worked to implement it. His six-month stint at DHS saw at least a 40 percent increase in deportation arrests and a stark drop in unauthorized border crossings. He also considered separating mothers from their children in detention facilities as a deterrence mechanism, before eventually nixing that idea.

"Kelly is a soldier, a military guy, and I think the softer parts of DHS's mission [were] a pretty steep learning curve for him," said a former USCIS official, who agreed to be speak on condition of anonymity.

Since arriving at the department, Kelly heaped praise on CBP and ICE law enforcement agents and suggested that they were hamstrung in the previous administration. "The men and women of my department have been political pawns," Kelly said in a speech at George Washington University on April 18. "My people have been discouraged from doing their jobs for nearly a decade."

In contrast, Kelly's warm embrace did not extend to those responsible for vetting refugees and processing asylum claims. As Trump repeatedly attacked vetting standards for refugees and argued that they needed a complete review, Kelly never defended the work of his employees responsible for vetting or even visited them in the field.

"We all train together. They look down on us and think we're a bunch of 'huggers.' We think they are Gestapo, neo-Nazi types, all vets with PTSD," said the employee who attended the town hall meeting and did not want their name published in order to speak candidly. "One thing no one would ever say before Kelly is that we were on a different team."

Yet Kelly's heightened focus on rooting out illegal immigration exacerbated long-simmering tensions between the two sides at DHS.

"He's gone to the border, done events with ICE and Transportation Security Administration, and loves spending time with those guys," the employee said. "But he made a really frosty and unfriendly environment with us."