

POLITICS

Trump Loves ICE. Its Workforce Has Never Been So Miserable.

A “mission impossible” deportation campaign has left many employees burned out and morally conflicted.

By Nick Miroff



Michael Nigro / Sipa USA / Reuters

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ICE occupies an exalted place in President Donald Trump’s hierarchy of law enforcement. He praises the bravery and fortitude of Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers—“the toughest people you’ll ever meet,” he says—and depicts them as heroes in the central plot of his presidency, helping him rescue the country from an invasion of gang members and mental patients. The 20,000 ICE employees are the unflinching men and women who will restore order. They’re the Untouchables in his MAGA crime drama.

The reality of Trump’s mass-deportation campaign is far less glamorous. Officers and agents have spent much of the past five months clocking weekends and waking up at

4 a.m. for predawn raids. Their top leaders have been ousted or demoted, and their supervisors—themselves under threat of being fired—are pressuring them to make more and more arrests to meet quotas set by the Trump adviser Stephen Miller. Having insisted for years that capturing criminals is its priority, ICE is now shelving major criminal investigations to prioritize civil immigration arrests, grabbing asylum seekers at their courthouse hearings, handcuffing mothers as their U.S.-citizen children cry, chasing day laborers through Home Depot parking lots. As angry onlookers attempt to shame ICE officers with obscenities, and activists try to dox them, officers are retreating further behind masks and tactical gear.

“It’s miserable,” one career ICE official told me. He called the job “mission impossible.”

I recently spoke with a dozen current and former ICE agents and officers about morale at the agency since Trump took office. Most spoke on the condition of anonymity, for fear of losing their job or being subjected to a polygraph exam. They described varying levels of dissatisfaction but weren’t looking to complain or expecting sympathy—certainly not at a time when many Americans have been disturbed by video clips of masked and hooded officers seizing immigrants who were not engaged in any obvious criminal behavior. The frustration isn’t yet producing mass resignations or major internal protests, but the officers and agents described a workforce on edge, vilified by broad swaths of the public and bullied by Trump officials demanding more and more.

Despite Trump’s public praise for ICE officers, several staffers told me that they feel contempt from administration officials who have implied they were too passive—too comfortable—under the Biden administration.

SOME ICE EMPLOYEES BELIEVE that the shift in priorities is driven by a political preoccupation with deportation numbers rather than keeping communities safe. At ICE's Homeland Security Investigations division, which has long focused on cartels and major drug-trafficking operations, supervisors have waved agents off new cases so they have more time to make immigration-enforcement arrests, a veteran agent told me. "No drug cases, no human trafficking, no child exploitation," the agent said. "It's infuriating." The longtime ICE employee is thinking about quitting rather than having to continue "arresting gardeners."

The administration argues that morale has actually never been higher—and will only improve as ICE officials begin spending billions in new federal funding. Tricia McLaughlin, the spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees ICE, said in a statement the agency's workforce has welcomed its new mission under Trump. "After four years of not being allowed to do their jobs, the brave men and women at ICE are excited to be able to do their jobs again," McLaughlin said.

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But ICE's physical infrastructure is buckling. The agency is holding nearly 60,000 people in custody, the highest number ever, but it has been funded for only 41,000 detention beds, so processing centers are packed with people sleeping on floors in short-term holding cells with nowhere to shower.

"Morale is in the crapper," another former investigative agent told me. "Even those that are gung ho about the mission aren't happy with how they are asking to execute it—the quotas and the shift to the low-hanging fruit to make the numbers."

A common theme of my conversations was dissatisfaction with the White House's focus on achieving 1 million deportations annually, a goal that many ICE employees view as logistically unrealistic and physically exhausting. The agency has never done more than a quarter of that number in a single year. But ICE's top officials are so scared of being fired—the White House has staged two purges already—that they don't push back, another official told me.

Miller has made clear that not hitting that goal is not an option. He and DHS Secretary Kristi Noem called ICE's top leaders to Washington in May and berated them in a tense meeting. Miller set a daily arrest quota of 3,000, a fourfold increase over the average during Trump's first few months. Veteran officials murmured and shifted in their seats, but Miller steamrolled anyone who spoke up.

"No one is saying, 'This is not obtainable,'" the official told me. "The answer is just to keep banging the field"—which is what ICE calls rank-and-file officers—"and tell the field they suck. It's just not a good atmosphere."

Several career officials have been pushed out of leadership roles. Other employees have decided to quit. Adam Boyd, a 33-year-old attorney who resigned from ICE's legal department last month, told me he left because the mission was no longer about protecting the homeland from threats. "It became a contest of how many deportations could be reported to Stephen Miller by December," Boyd said. He told me that he saw frustration among ICE attorneys whose cases were dismissed just so officer teams could grab their clients in the hallways for fast-track deportations that pad the stats. Some detainees had complex claims that attorneys have to screen before their initial hearings, to ensure due process. Others with strong asylum cases were likely to end up back in court later anyway. The hallway arrests sent the message that the immigration courts were just a convenient place to handcuff people. Some ICE attorneys "are only waiting until their student loans are forgiven, and then they're leaving," he said.

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Boyd, who worked at the Department of Justice after law school, said he'd always envisioned a long career in public service. "I had to make a moral decision," he told me. "We still need good attorneys at ICE. There are drug traffickers and national-security threats and human-rights violators in our country who need to be dealt with. But we are now focusing on numbers over all else."



Federal officers attempt to detain an individual, who was later released, as he exited immigration court in New York City on June 30. (Michael M. Santiago / Getty)

OVER THE HOLIDAY WEEKEND, Trump wrote a gushing “THANK YOU!” post to the ICE workforce that acknowledged the strains of the job and promised that relief was on the way. The Republican spending bill he signed on Independence Day will give the agency “ALL of the Funding and Resources that ICE needs to carry out the Largest Mass Deportation Operation in History,” he wrote.

“Our Brave ICE Officers, who are under daily violent assault, will finally have the tools and support that they need,” Trump said.

The amount of money for ICE in the bill is staggering: A \$170 billion package for Trump’s border-and-immigration crackdown, which includes \$45 billion for new detention facilities, more than doubling the number of available beds, and \$30 billion for ICE operations, including hiring thousands more officers and agents. To put those sums in perspective, ICE’s entire annual budget is about \$9 billion.

Abigail Jackson, a White House spokesperson, said in a statement that the legislation includes money for “well-deserved bonuses.” Trump officials said they’ll provide \$10,000 annual bonuses for ICE personnel as well as Border Patrol agents, along with \$10,000 for new hires.

ICE officials say it takes roughly 18 months to recruit, screen, hire, train, and deploy a new officer. The White House doesn’t plan to wait that long. The administration is preparing a plan to assign military personnel to help with enforcement work, one official who wasn’t authorized to talk about the plan told me. They will primarily help with processing new detainees and preparing deportation paperwork for those in custody. And the additional billions in the Republican funding bill will allow ICE to hire private contractors to prepare target lists and other administrative tasks.

“We’re trying to keep morale up,” one official told me. “We’re telling everyone, ‘The cavalry is coming.’”

Some ICE officers have been thrilled by Trump’s changes and what they describe as newfound free rein. They chafed at rules set under the Biden administration, which prioritized the deportation of serious offenders but generally took a hands-off approach to those who hadn’t committed crimes. Officers said they used to worry about getting in trouble for making a mistake and wrongly arresting someone; now the risk is not being aggressive enough.

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Other ICE veterans, who long insisted that their agency was misunderstood and unfairly maligned by activists as a goon squad, have been disturbed by video clips of officers smashing suspects’ car windows and appearing to round up people indiscriminately. They worry that ICE is morphing into its own caricature.

“What we’re seeing now is what, for many years, we were accused of being, and could always safely say, ‘We don’t do that,’” another former ICE official told me.

JOHN SANDWEG, WHO SERVED AS acting ICE director during part of President Barack Obama’s second term, told me he remembered conducting town-hall meetings with the agency’s workforce along with Tom Homan, a former ICE leader who is now Trump’s “border czar.” Morale was a challenge then too, Sandweg said, but the problems were more related to lunch-pail issues such as overtime compensation and employee–management relations.

Those who signed up for ICE “like the mission of getting bad guys off the street,” Sandweg told me, but what they’re doing now is “no longer about the quality of the apprehensions.”

“It’s more about the quantity,” he said. “And senior leaders are getting ripped apart.”

The agency is split primarily into two branches: Enforcement and Removal Operations, which has about 5,500 immigration-enforcement officers, and Homeland Security Investigations, whose roughly 7,000 agents investigate drug smuggling, human trafficking, counterfeit goods, and a range of other cross-border criminal activities.

Even at ERO, many officers have spent their career doing work more akin to immigration case management: ensuring compliance with court orders, negotiating with attorneys, coordinating deportation logistics. There are specialized “fugitive operations” teams that go out looking for absconders and offenders with criminal records, but they are a subset of the broader workforce.

There have long been tensions between ICE’s two divisions, and during Trump’s first term, the leaders of HSI began pushing more formally to break away from ERO, to forge their own identity. The stigma of ICE’s deportation work was undermining their ability to conduct criminal investigations in jurisdictions with sanctuary policies—including nearly every major U.S. city—that limit police cooperation with ICE.

Some at ICE ERO viewed this as a betrayal, akin to HSI agents looking down their nose at immigration enforcement. In recent years, HSI’s reputation was bolstered by the role its agents played in dismantling Mexican cartel networks and busting fentanyl traffickers. Alejandro Mayorkas, Joe Biden’s homeland-security secretary, expressed support for making HSI an independent agency, and last year, he allowed it to rebrand with its own logo and an email domain scrubbed of the “ICE” identifier.

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Those efforts have now backfired. HSI agents have been told to shift their focus to civil immigration enforcement and assisting ERO, effectively relegating them to be

junior partners in Trump’s mass-deportation campaign. Some agents and officials told me they suspect HSI is paying a price for wanting to distance itself from immigration enforcement.

“Their personnel are being picked off the investigative squads, and there’s only so many people to go around,” another former ICE official told me. “There are national-security and public-safety threats that are not being addressed.”

Noem has made clear that it’s her job to carry out Miller’s demands, no matter how unrealistic, and she has joined in the criticism of the agency she oversees. While tagging along on a predawn operation early this year, Noem posted live updates on social media, blowing the team’s cover for the rest of the day. And Noem has installed a former political aide, Madison Sheahan, to be the agency’s deputy director, a position typically held by veteran ICE officials. Sheahan, 28, formerly ran the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries but has little experience in law enforcement. Some ICE officers have nicknamed her “fish cop.”

One former ICE official told me that the Biden administration treated the agency’s workers with more basic decency and appreciation, even as their caseload grew.

“Giving people leave, recognizing them for small stuff, that kind of thing. It went a long way,” the official said. “Now I think you have an issue where the administration has come in very aggressive and people are really not happy, because of the perception that the administration doesn’t give a shit about them.”

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