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Operation Lone Star: the spectacle of immigration federalism

by

Danielle Puretz

A capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in International Migration Studies in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City  
University of New York

2022

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Operation Lone Star: the spectacle of immigration federalism

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Danielle Puretz

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in International Migration Studies in satisfaction of the capstone requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

MM/DD/YY

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## ABSTRACT

Operation Lone Star: the spectacle of immigration federalism

by

Danielle Puretz

Advisor: Monica Varsanyi

Texas Governor Greg Abbott launched Operation Lone Star in March 2021 to respond to the “crisis” at the United States/Mexico border. While in the US immigration is usually thought of as a federal responsibility, different states have worked to expand their capacity to welcome or exclude immigrants. Operation Lone Star is an example of how one state is working to restrict immigration to the US and build notoriety for its republican governor. Drawing on press releases, executive orders, news articles, opinion pieces, and other sources I highlight the performative politics within this initiative. Operation Lone Star is an example of how states promote spectacular interpretations of the border to levy power against the federal government and capture attention for political entrepreneurs. Leaning on theories of border spectacle and border games, I demonstrate how the tension between federal and state governments makes immigration federalism particularly prone to image-driven politics. I conclude with suggestions for future research into immigration federalism and anti-immigrant sentiment.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the many people who supported me in writing this thesis and throughout this master's program. My deepest gratitude to my advisor, Monica Varsanyi, for her mentorship, encouragement, and feedback in this thesis and my career in academia. Thank you to my International Migration Studies (IMS) cohort, who were a constant source inspiration through the various stages of this program and as we struggled through the "unprecedented times" of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you to the IMS faculty and staff for creating this relevant and accessible opportunity to study immigration at the Graduate Center. Thank you to my colleagues at Doctors Without Borders whose flexibility and support made it possible to work full-time while completing this program. And of course, thank you to my family, friends, and loving partner for believing in and celebrating this achievement with me.

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## DEDICATION

*I am the first in my father's family to receive a bachelor's degree and the first in my mother's to attain a master's degree. This thesis is dedicated to my immigrant ancestors who came to the US from Eastern Europe, Ireland, and Italy in search of a better life for themselves and their descendants.*



## **Introduction**

Donald Trump's border wall served as a polemical touchstone of his candidacy and presidency—the overarching symbol of immigration restrictionism that resonated with and rallied his supporters. While the wall and Trump's "America first" rhetoric galvanized support, it also incited opposition. In 2020, presidential candidate Joe Biden postured himself to stand for everything that Trump was not, including promising to stop border wall construction upon his election. And when President Biden was inaugurated in January 2021, the new president fulfilled this promise by issuing an Executive Order that halted ongoing border wall construction, voided open ended contracts relating to the construction, and left recent constructions as they were.

Swiftly following the Executive Order, republican critics began to disparage President Biden's "open border" policies. After three decades of increasing border barriers and personnel along the US/Mexico boundary, the notion that Biden's Executive Order to stop recent construction created an "open" border is absurd. However, rhetoric around immigration enforcement has become extremely polarized. Donald Trump set a standard for enforcement that requires a border wall. Bizarrely, whether a border wall is effective, is almost irrelevant because its function is mostly symbolic. A border wall is a monument to anti-immigrant sentiment, a way for politicians to stand against unauthorized (or even authorized, in some instances) immigration. So, although Biden technically did very little with his executive order, it carried symbolic weight for both his supporters and especially opponents.

A notable critic of the president, Texas governor Greg Abbott, launched a plan in March 2021 in opposition to Biden's stated approach on immigration. The plan, "Operation Lone Star,"

was created to “combat the smuggling of people and drugs into Texas”.<sup>1</sup> Governor Abbott’s primary rationale for the operation has focused on the federal government and the notion that he was left without choice:

The crisis at our southern border continues to escalate because of Biden Administration policies that refuse to secure the border and invite illegal immigration [...] Texas supports legal immigration but will not be an accomplice to the open border policies that cause, rather than prevent, a humanitarian crisis in our state and endanger the lives of Texans. We will surge the resources and law enforcement personnel needed to confront this crisis.<sup>2</sup>

In the months following the initial announcement, the governor detailed his plan for the operation to include increased personnel at the Texas/Mexico border and to build a Texas/Mexico border wall. The governor crafts a narrative that President Biden has abandoned Texas and refuses to secure “our” border, so Abbott, as the governor of Texas, is doing what he must to secure the state and country. The melodramatic narrative he creates has multiple villains—migrants, cartels, and the new democratic president—and one main hero, the governor. According to Abbott, the president has no regard for the consequences of an insecure border, namely dangerous drugs (fentanyl) and human trafficking, meaning Abbott’s efforts are not only righteous, but essential.

Although Abbott’s goal of “securing the border” was always very clear, what exactly this means in practice has remained relatively unclear. Throughout the operation, Abbott began various initiatives to attract attention and contradict the federal government with the tools at his disposal (i.e. legal action, executive order, etc.). Throughout the operation critics of Governor Abbott have called out his actions as performative publicity stunts. And in the instance of

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<sup>1</sup> “Governor Abbott, DPS Launch ‘Operation Lone Star’ To Address Crisis At Southern Border.” Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott, March 6, 2021. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-dps-launch-operation-lone-star-to-address-crisis-at-southern-border>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

suddenly increasing Texas National Guard troops deployed to the southern border, even those who had previously supported the governor have called the initiative “a disaster”<sup>3</sup>, where the troops felt like “glorified mall cops”<sup>4</sup> and have spoken plainly of hating the assignment.<sup>5</sup>

In his seminal book, *Border Games*, Political scientist Peter Andreas (2000) has framed the symbolic and performative dimensions of immigration policy as “border spectacle” and “border games”. During this period, immigration went from being a relatively fringe issue (“low politics”) to much higher profile (“high politics”). And in this process, the border became the primary stage for politicians to express their beliefs on immigration, as they entered a terrain of largely symbolic image management. For example, Andreas argues that the dominant border enforcement narrative is that the government is reactive to migration, emphasizing migrants and erasing the role of the government as a key player in shaping migration patterns, i.e., through military interventions or immigration policy. When it comes to advocating for policies, it is much easier to gain support for border enforcement—as the image of the border is the source of popular anxiety—than to build a plan to address domestic demand for immigrant labor and drugs, which would be more complicated and take longer to see visible effects. And this logic works in cycles, because if people continue to perceive an issue after escalating enforcement, the solution is to add even more enforcement, thus the “seductive appeal” of ever-increasing escalation of border enforcement (Andreas 2000).

The 1990s are marked by what scholars have termed the neoliberal paradox (Varsanyi

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<sup>3</sup> Davis Winkie, Military Times. “Deplorable Conditions, Unclear Mission: Texas National Guard Troops Call Abbott's Rushed Border Operation a Disaster.” The Texas Tribune, The Texas Tribune, 1 Feb. 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/02/01/texas-national-guard-border-operation-lone-star-abbott/>.

<sup>4</sup> Goodman, J. David. “‘We're Basically Mall Cops’: Texas Guard Members on Border Mission.” The New York Times. The New York Times, January 19, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/19/us/texas-national-guard-greg-abbott.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Davis Winkie, Military Times, and Military Times Rachel Cohen. “‘I Hate It Here’: National Guard Members Sound Off on Texas Border Mission in Leaked Morale Survey.” The Texas Tribune. The Texas Tribune, February 24, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/02/24/national-guard-Texas-border-morale-survey/>.

2008)—the simultaneous opening of the border to economic flows and hardening of the border for people (migrants). This contradiction dispelled myths that borders would become irrelevant in the time of globalization as controls tightened around both the US and Europe. Andreas sees this as post-Cold War anxiety around security, as the need for an adversary led to obsessions with unauthorized migration and smuggling of drugs, and kicked off cycles of increasing budgets, personnel, and infrastructure along the border. While there are some small differences in the last 20 years—namely, more migrants arriving from Central America and instead of heroin and marijuana, fentanyl is the primary drug of concern—a key change since the time of Andrea’s writing is how border games now play out at the state level.

Nearly all news articles and reporting on Operation Lone Star declare Governor Abbott’s actions at the state level to be unlawful, as the federal government retains exclusive rights over enforcing and legislating immigration. However, throughout US history, this has not always been the case, and in recent decades has become more of a question than a *fait accompli*. Scholars of immigration federalism (Varsanyi 2010, Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan 2015) have explored the movement of states into this policy realm: states operating in the domain of immigration enforcement or creating laws that further integrate/exclude immigrants. Immigration federalism is prone to spectacle precisely because there are not clear or consistent boundaries where states’ right to enforce or create immigration policy begin or end. Rather, there is a push and pull of states enacting policy that then is either upheld or dismissed by federal courts based on federal supremacy, equal protection under the constitution, etc.

Border spectacle and border games have been greatly theorized at the national level. Immigration scholars such as Nicholas De Genova have named the effective goal of border spectacle to sustain a precarious labor force vulnerable to deportation (De Genova 2010). And

Leo Chavez brought together media spectacles, anxieties over immigration, and exclusive notions of citizenship through what he calls the Latino Threat Narrative (Chavez 2013). These theoretical concepts are encompassing enough to capture many localities. However, specifically investigating the state level reveals the site of immigration federalism to be another field of image driven politics, where it is not only a partisan game, but the border spectacle is invoked for the additional goals of capturing national attention, political entrepreneurialism, and to challenge state/federal authority and responsibility.

In this thesis I explore the performative dimensions of immigration federalism by analyzing the border games in the Texas case study. What motivates the Texas border spectacle? How does a state exercise political will in conflict with the federal government? Through discourse analysis of press releases and government documents, news articles, and opinion pieces, I work through the question of what is behind the performative immigration politics in Texas and what we might glean from considering theoretical concepts at the state, rather than national, level.

I begin with literature on immigration policy and its contradictions, border games/spectacle, and immigration federalism, highlighting different theories about performative immigration politics and the conditions in which they arise. I then discuss the methods through which I found and analyzed data. Then, I further discuss the Texas case study, offering a comprehensive timeline of Operation Lone Star, and discuss how policies have been proposed and justified in opposition to the federal government, highlight discursive contradictions, political entrepreneurialism, and moments that demonstrate tension between the federal and state governments. And finally, I conclude with a summary of my findings and propositions for future research.

## Literature review

### Immigration policy and its contradictions

Peter Andreas explains that some of the most effective border policies technically accomplish nothing, because if policies are too effective, then they will also generate grievances (Andreas 2000). So the objective becomes demonstrating the will to act, convincing anxious constituents and stakeholders that actions have been taken, and then doing as little as possible. While this might seem contradictory, it demonstrates the performativity within immigration policy and politics. How immigration or the border are described creates public narratives and affects public sentiment on immigrants. Negative narratives especially impact black and brown immigrants and their communities, who face material consequences from being racialized as illegal.

The contradiction of performative politics is inevitable because the US is dependent on immigrants, and specifically undocumented immigrants, in sectors such as agriculture and construction.<sup>6</sup> Sociolegal scholar Kitty Calavita highlights a trend in immigration policy: “the failure of immigration policies to achieve their purported intent, recreates what is often referred to as the immigration problem” (1998, 147). This circular logic stems from the contradictions embedded in immigrant exclusion, namely that the US is heavily dependent on immigrant labor, so policies can never be too restrictive. And further, the immigration problem is created through narrative and emotional affect—immigrants do not create a problem, the problem is based on how people feel about immigrants at a given moment.

Nicholas De Genova explains the productive capacity of this contradiction in producing

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<sup>6</sup> Krogstad, Jens Manuel, Mark Hugo Lopez, and Jeffrey S. Passel. “A Majority of Americans Say Immigrants Mostly Fill Jobs U.S. Citizens Do Not Want.” Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, August 26, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/10/a-majority-of-americans-say-immigrants-mostly-fill-jobs-u-s-citizens-do-not-want/>.

exploitable immigrant labor—because undocumented immigrants live under the constant fear of deportation, they are less likely to advocate for themselves or report their employers for unsafe working conditions (De Genova 2010). At different periods in US history, employers—particularly within agriculture—lobbied officials and were responsible for how open or enforced immigration was (Lee 2019; Tichenor 2009). For example, Calavita explains in her book, *Inside the State*, that the Bracero program was founded out of a crisis of legitimacy of the Immigration Naturalization Service (INS). As the government entity responsible for immigration, the INS was unable to curb the relationship between Southwestern agricultural employers and Mexican laborers. So to insert themselves into this relationship, they founded the guest worker program that included significant advantages for agricultural firms to persuade them to use it, demonstrating the pressure on immigration policy makers from employers and their will to accommodate (Calavita 1992).

One “success” of immigration policies of recent decades has been moving migration out of the public eye through increased enforcement near ports of entry. In his book *Deportation Nation* (2007), Daniel Kanstroom reflects on border militarization under President Clinton: “The operations have been effective in some ways—such as decreasing the embarrassing spectacles of ‘kamikaze’ runs across the border in Southern California. And they certainly look effective. Operation Rio Grande in Texas used floodlights, watchtowers, video surveillance, and infrared sights along more than thirty miles of border” (Kanstroom 2007, 13). These measures are lauded as deterrents, but have actually funneled migrants into the less populated, and more dangerous, areas of the border (De León 2015). Andreas calls this kind of effort “politically recrafting the image of the border and symbolically reaffirming the state’s territorial authority”(Andreas 2000, 85). And although politicians promote the narrative that the border is out of control to strengthen

their image, this also threatens their legitimacy and authority, because it can create a problem they may not be able to manage.

### **Border games and spectacle**

Policy contradictions are often a sign of spectacle. Cetta Mainwaring and Stephanie Silverman write of the spectacle in immigration detention as: “such divergence between stated and realized objectives suggests that detention systems contribute to the spectacle of enforcement in a particularly valuable way” (2017, 22). The border spectacle is invoked to garner support for immigration enforcement, and the spectacle has a profound ability to dictate how people perceive of immigrants and how secure or insecure the border is.

The theoretical concept of the spectacle I use comes from Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). The spectacle is apt for considering border games and narratives because it provides a theoretical explanation for the reoccurrence of image driven policies that do not yield their stated objectives. Debord crafts a series of hypotheses, including:

- 1 - In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.
- 2 - The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. *Fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudoworld* that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving. [...]
- 4 - The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images (Debord 1967, 16-17 emphasis in original)

Spectacles create simplistic narratives; this is the “receding” into representation. For immigration and border politics, these become the melodramatic portrayals of who is coming and why they are coming. Through spectacular representations, people migrating are dehumanized and narratives are created about people invading the country illegally. The border spectacle grows as



people heighten the image of and anxiety about the border, but ultimately it is autonomized, and even people who have made it grow have little control over it. And It is not only the scene of the border that makes the spectacle, but how the concept of the border draws citizens and non-citizens into a relationship to one another (Chavez 2007). Through political performance, someone crossing the border without authorization becomes “illegal”—which then leads to criminalization of immigrants and their communities (Abrego et al. 2017; De Genova 2004). Therefore, we can consider the ways in which the border is portrayed as both cause and consequence of anti-immigrant sentiment.

A spectacle focuses attention and concern—it is defined by its image, but it also has a profound ability to obscure. Amid so much immigration enforcement, why have we not seen a great decline in the undocumented population? Andreas questions enforcement practices on the basis that if the federal government genuinely wanted to stop unauthorized immigration, then it would focus on demand for undocumented labor rather than supply of it. Yet, through the decades of increasing attention at the border, and even as enforcement has moved to the interior, we have not seen any great moves to sanction or otherwise punish people who employ undocumented immigrants. Calls for this kind of action are suspiciously sparse. And even in the moments where native-born citizens see undocumented immigrants as job competition, citizens blame the immigrants rather than their employers (e.x. Longazel 2016). Through the border spectacle, migrant “illegality” becomes the primary object of concern and the policies, law makers, and employers that determine the circumstances of immigration are forgotten (De Genova 2002, 2005, 2013).

Looking at violence perpetrated against immigrants and immigrant communities as performance and spectacles in no way means to diminish the scale of suffering these images

cause. In fact, despite many policies being ineffective in achieving their purported goals, these policies still inflict much harm upon the people and communities they target (Menjívar and Abrego 2012). While the border spectacle propagates immigration restrictionism that effects all immigrants, anti-immigrant sentiment is spread unevenly. Leo Chavez's work in his book, *The Latino Threat* (2007), looks at consequences this narrative has had for Mexican and Latino immigrants who are targeted by media and political spectacles, thus developing them into permanent "non-citizens". Chavez uses Debord's theory to explain how media spectacles are productive as they "receive an inordinate volume of media attention and public opinion"(Chavez 2007, 5) and create conventional wisdom. One particularly insidious understanding Chavez finds, is the notion that Latinos are "invading" the US. His theoretical framework offers a way of understanding the reoccurring villainization of Latino immigrants and communities. So when we see the Latino threat narrative reemerge, and inflammatory rhetoric on "invasion", this narrative is not so much grounded in present events, but based on a pre-existing spectacle that shapes understandings.

The reoccurring themes of the border spectacle are how it dehumanizes people (especially Latinos), propagates fear, justifies escalation of border and interior enforcement, and how it obscures reality. The autonomized spectacle retains historical memory of how the border has been portrayed. The border might not be the top issue at all moments, but as soon as something happens at the border, the border spectacle, lying in waiting, is invoked and all previous fear and anxiety returns. The gravitational pull of the border spectacle makes it such that politicians cannot talk about immigration without talking about the US/Mexico border. And the spectacle has the productive capacity of keeping migrants in a vulnerable position—vulnerable to labor exploitation, deportation, and death (Longazel and Hallett 2021).

## **Immigration federalism**

The primary domains of immigration federalism are states' will to include or integrate immigrants or exclude them or make them ineligible for social services. Prominent examples of states working to exclude immigrants are through local police agreements with ICE through 287(g) or the Secure Communities programs, or by making them ineligible for social services (Varsanyi et al. 2012; Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Armenta 2017; Coleman 2021). The question that has been repeatedly asked is if the state is violating federal plenary power over immigration—so far, the state cannot authorize a person's ability to live or not in the US. However, they can make it extremely difficult for them.

Pratheepan Gulasekaram and S. Karthick Ramakrishnan (2015) explain the different stages of immigration federalism that have led to the current dynamic between state and federal government in their book, *The New Immigration Federalism*. States at one point were the primary entities responsible for regulating immigration, then federal plenary power was established and empowered the federal government with exclusive rights to regulate immigration. Federal plenary power has largely prevailed, but in recent decades states have worked to expand their powers to either restrict or welcome immigrants. This current phase of immigration federalism began around 1994, and since this time there has been consistent tension between federal and state government (Varsanyi 2010).

Two consistent factors in states efforts to enact anti-immigrant policies that Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan find are states' emphasis on federal negligence and the predictive factor of partisanship (Republican-majority) to exclusionist policies. The authors explain that states often try to justify their immigration policies by citing a failure of the federal government to fix the immigration system. The vision of the federal government as inactive can be understood as

Congress's inability to act, but this concept ignores that immigration policy has largely been consistent since the Immigration Nationality Act in 1952 and in recent decades budgets, enforcement personnel, immigrant detention facilities, and deportations have almost exclusively increased. Thus, Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan find federal inaction to be a "highly dubious starting point"(ibid, 88) in explaining state and local restrictionist policies, despite the prevalence of its rhetorical invocation. Instead, "*party polarization and ethnic nationalism*—when mobilized by *issue entrepreneurs*, account for both federal inaction and the rise in subnational legislation"(ibid, 89; emphasis original). Additionally, immigration federalism has been noted as an opportunity for local politicians to gain national notoriety, and therefore become a domain for political entrepreneurialism (Longazel 2016; Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan 2015; Jacobson 2008).

In recent years, the polemical nature of the border spectacle has impacted immigration federalism as Trump's discourse rallied support and fervent opposition. Although sanctuary cities are often considered to be symbolic, after Trump was elected president, there was a huge wave of cities and states developing sanctuary statuses and sanctuary bans.<sup>7</sup> Local proclamations of sanctuary or not, are only part of the picture. Many areas of the US have a mix of policies that integrate (i.e., financial aid at universities, health care, driver's license eligibility) and make people vulnerable to deportation (i.e., federal agreements with ICE) that have diminished the federal government's ability to determine the immigration climate at a given moment (Reich 2018). These policies demonstrate how immigration federalism is often reactive to national politics, particularly the reigning party and their stance on immigration.

Today we see the border spectacle heavily mobilized at the state level, which echoes the

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<sup>7</sup> Wilson, Reid. "Trump Spurs Wave of State Immigration Laws." The Hill. The Hill, August 8, 2017. <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/345648-trump-spurs-wave-of-new-immigration-laws/>.

political entrepreneurialism of the Trump Era and before but reflects the rescaling of immigration/border politics to the state and local level. Literature discussing immigration federalism has clearly noted reactionary politics and political entrepreneurialism, but the spectacular dimension of these politics has been under studied. This thesis makes the theoretical contribution of how image-driven politics promote the border spectacle at the state level. And I make an empirical contribution by detailing Operation Lone Star, which reflects the political entrepreneurialism and spectacle politics of prior times and prior literature, but which has not yet been discussed in the literature.

## **Data and Methods**

To research the ongoing events in Texas and Operation Lone Star, I Google news searched key terms “Operation Lone Star”, “Texas border wall”, and “Greg Abbott”. Most hits came from articles in *The Texas Tribune*, *Houston Chronicle*, or the *New York Times*. To explore further, I would search within each of these and other Texas-based news sites for key terms including, “immigration,” “border,” “Operation Lone Star,” and explore their sections on state and local politics. Additionally, in each news article I read, other articles would be hyperlinked therein, and this was a common way that I found sources. This also led me to documents from the Department of Justice, press releases from nonprofits (ex. ACLU), and other sources.

Another key channel for data in this project has been Governor Abbott’s press releases. From March 2021 through August 1, 2022, the office issued 98 press releases related to Operation Lone Star, out of 574 total press releases in this time period. I read these press releases and coded them to identify the prevalence of common themes federal government (specifically President Biden), open border policies, human trafficking, drugs/fentanyl, crime, and humanitarian crisis. The press releases were foundational to assembling a timeline of Operation Lone Star and determining how Governor Abbott has narrativized this initiative. Beyond these, news articles and other documents helped to identify what the governor’s office has omitted from their official narrative.

## Case study

Operation Lone Star was officially launched on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 to address “the crisis at the southern border.” The initial announcement declares the cooperation of the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) and the Texas National Guard as the operation “deploys air, ground, marine, and tactical border security assets to high threat areas to deny Mexican Cartels and other smugglers the ability to move drugs and people into Texas.”<sup>8</sup> In this initial description it is clear in the governor’s rhetoric that the people attempting to cross the border into the US are not welcome. However, it is notable how Abbott frames the issue as “Mexican Cartels” smuggling people. This initial rallying cry tries to gain support against a universal villain (cartels) and the federal government who has done nothing to stop them. Immigration federalism is often marked by states expressing ideological opposition to the reigning party in federal government (Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan 2015), and this moment is marked by the transition of Donald Trump’s patently anti-immigrant administration to Joe Biden, who claims to be more pro-immigrant. This is already the kind of transition that would incite states to express opposition, but the conditions of the border spectacle from the Trump administration set the standards that the republican governor would reach for with his operation.

In the first press releases of the operation, the situation in the borderlands is referred to as a “humanitarian crisis”. In March 2021, a camp without running water in Matamoros, MX across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, TX sheltered 3000 migrants awaiting asylum claims.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> “Governor Abbott, DPS Launch ‘Operation Lone Star’ To Address Crisis At Southern Border.” Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott, March 6, 2021. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-dps-launch-operation-lone-star-to-address-crisis-at-southern-border>.

<sup>9</sup> Kriel, Lomi. “The People We Left behind: How Closing a Dangerous Border Camp Adds to Inequities.” The Texas Tribune. The Texas Tribune, March 18, 2021. <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/03/18/asylum-mexico-border-migrants/>.

Gottesdiener, Laura. “Mexican Camp That Was Symbol of Migrant Misery Empties out under Biden.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, March 7, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-mexico-feature/mexican-camp-that-was-symbol-of-migrant-misery-empties-out-under-biden-idUSKBN2AZ0GB>.

asylum seekers were forced to stay on the Mexican side of the border through a Trump era policy “Migrant Protection Protocols” (Remain in Mexico), that forced more than 71,000 migrants back to Mexico to await their asylum claims from 2019 to March 2021. Given the conditions of this camp and others like it, humanitarian crisis is an apt characterization of the situation. However, when Governor Greg Abbott invokes this term, he exclusively is referring to the Texas side of the Texas/Mexico border: “Border security is the federal government’s responsibility, but the State of Texas will not allow the administration’s failures to endanger the lives of innocent Texans. Instead, Texas is stepping up to fill the gaps left open by the federal government to secure the border, apprehend dangerous criminals, and keep Texans safe.”<sup>10</sup> There is not a further justification for why the conditions in Texas should qualify as a humanitarian crisis. This did, however, build on rhetoric used by Trump previously.

In January 2019, Trump was criticized by NGOs after calling migrant camps along the border a humanitarian crisis for their threat to the US. For example, Doctors Without Borders tweeted “It’s incomprehensible that this administration is using the dangers migrants face to justify policies that put those same lives at risk. A humanitarian crisis demands a humanitarian response.”<sup>11</sup> And Amnesty International tweeted “President Trump is addressing the nation tonight to spin his fake news and hateful rhetoric, but Americans know the truth [...] The Trump admin manufactured this humanitarian crisis.”<sup>12</sup> Trump and Abbott’s invocation of humanitarianism is not meant to solicit humanitarian action as it is classically understood, providing assistance. To these politicians, the humanitarian crisis is a description of the US side

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<sup>10</sup> “Governor Abbott Provides Update On State Response To Humanitarian Crisis At Southern Border.” Office of the Texas Governor | Greg Abbott, March 9, 2021. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-provides-update-on-state-response-to-humanitarian-crisis-at-southern-border> .

<sup>11</sup> Gharib, Malaka. “Humanitarian Experts Debate Trump's Use of the Term 'Humanitarian Crisis'.” NPR, January 9, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/01/09/683533895/humanitarian-experts-debate-trumps-use-of-the-term-humanitarian-crisis>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



of the border where migrants are entering the country and is used as justification to increase security to keep them out.

Each of the early announcements relating to Operation Lone Star, target President Biden, his “open border policies”, and his “refusal to secure the border”. From March 6, 2021 to August 1, 2022 out of the 98 press releases Abbott’s office issued related to Operation Lone Star, 81 of them mention President Biden by name and 47 use the phrase “open border”. This demonstrates how Abbott is characterizing his operation in direct opposition to the Biden administration. In Abbott’s narrative, he has an allegiance to the law that Biden does not, that he is responding to a problem that Biden is ignoring. States often use this argument, that they are filling a void in the law, to try to sidestep plenary power. But this narrative is almost always false because there is already so much federal immigration policy and enforcement (Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan 2015).

Eleven days after the initial announcement, on March 17, 2021, Governor Abbott announced the expansion of Operation Lone Star to target human trafficking. This effort doubles down on the invocation of a humanitarian issue, i.e., human trafficking, and the villains of cartels and traffickers, who can be used to rally support. There is no proportionality in this description—how widespread the office believes this problem to be or the scale at which they plan to combat it. Rather, they emphasize simplistic bold fear-inducing buzz words to gain support for the operation. Human trafficking is huge problem around the world, but when it is invoked in this spectacular way, it both creates reality and conceals it. When Abbott says that Operation Lone Star combats human trafficking, it creates legitimacy for this effort without requiring further elaboration or planning, it also makes the operation more necessary and urgent—informing how people understand the situation at the border. It conceals reality by using it to justify security

measures and detaining migrants. The connection between detaining migrants and human trafficking is extremely tenuous—but because of how spectacles have a propensity to self-justify, this invocation deflects scrutiny.

From March 23 to April 15, 2021 Abbott sent four letters to President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. The letters demanded that the federal government investigate allegations of human trafficking, interview child migrants, and begin an investigation into the cartels that brought them to the US. Abbott also demanded the closure of an unaccompanied minor facility in Texas and the designation of Mexican Cartels as terrorist organizations. This series of letters begins to highlight a contradiction of Abbott’s narrative—a simultaneous concern and revulsion for migrants. Concern, because he calls them human trafficking victims, emphasizes the vulnerability of child migrants, and sees them as victims forced to migrate to the US by Mexican Cartels. And yet, simultaneous revulsion is shown in his proposed solutions—securing the border to keep all potential migrants out including those he calls child trafficking victims and demands that the federal detention facilities move the migrants outside the state of Texas. Protesting the location of migrant detention facilities is not unfounded (e.x. Loyd and Mountz 2018), but there is something unique about Abbott’s simultaneous increasing capacity of state facilities and demanding for the closure of a federal one. Amid his co-opting of humanitarian crisis, cries for the welfare of migrant children, and demands for increased border security, we begin to see a frequency of tactics to garner attention that either do not work together or even contradict one another. When one does not work, he tries another. The letters to the president and vice president are a small example of this, but the repetition of varied uncoordinated tactics continues throughout Operation Lone Star.

Abbott’s plan for Operation Lone Star always included combatting the smuggling of

people and drugs, which he elevated by including language human trafficking as an official target. By the end of May 2021, Abbott specifies his focus on the smuggling of drugs to focus particularly fentanyl. According to the Center for Disease Control, 56,000 people died from overdoses of fentanyl and fentanyl analogs in 2020, a 56% from 2019 to 2020, and 18 times the amount in 2013.<sup>13</sup> Because of this, fentanyl is a hot topic and has garnered widespread concern across the US. Invoking it as a reason to support Operation Lone Star, plays into the melodramatic narrative Abbott sets forth, and demonstrates an attempt at capturing some of the national attention the drug receives. Like human trafficking, fentanyl is a universal villain—no one is going to argue that smuggling fentanyl into the US is a good thing. In tapping into this fight against fentanyl and creating these universal villains, Abbott sets a polemic, where you are either with him or against him—you are either against fentanyl and human trafficking, or you are for them, and if you are against them, then you are with Abbott. Yet, his solution to these problems does not directly address them as he remains focused on his singular goal, to secure the border.

Meanwhile, at the federal level, the Biden administration had suspended the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program and on June 1, 2021, DHS terminated program. In response, Texas and Missouri sued the federal government to keep the policy intact. This was not the first time that MPP had been in a federal court, in March 2020 immigrant advocates challenged Trump’s implementation of the program, and a California federal court blocked it before the Supreme Court overturned the lower court’s ruling.<sup>14</sup> The Texas and Missouri lawsuits were

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<sup>13</sup> “Fentanyl.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, June 1, 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/basics/fentanyl.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Dwyer, Colin. “Court Blocks Trump's 'Remain in Mexico' Policy along Part of the Border.” NPR, March 5, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/05/812474279/court-blocks-trumps-remain-in-mexico-policy-along-part-of-the-border>.

combined into *Biden v. Texas*, and in a Texas district court, a judge ruled that the Biden administration had to continue to enforce the policy. The 5<sup>th</sup> Circuit of appeals declined to block this ruling and the Biden administration took the case to the Supreme Court, where the court refused to hear the case in August 2021.<sup>15</sup>

Governor Abbott issued a statement on the decision: “President Biden’s partisan reversal of this policy has helped fuel the record surge in illegal migrants and contributed to an environment on the border that is neither safe, orderly, nor humane. President Biden’s policies, including his brazen attempt to reverse the MPP, have benefitted the cartels and dangerous criminals at the expense of Texans. This decision will halt the Biden administration from skirting its duty to enforce federal immigration laws and will reduce the record number of migrants entering our country illegally.”<sup>16</sup> MPP specifically targets asylum seekers and mandates that they remain in Mexico while they await their asylum hearings in the US. Many of the people coming to claim asylum over the last years turn themselves over to Border Patrol immediately, or have waited along port of entry bridges through metering policies.<sup>17</sup> The US has asylum laws, so the narrativization that these people are breaking laws is building the perception that they are criminals and should be feared. Abbott’s characterization never suggests that people should be offered safety and have been fleeing dangerous situations, instead it is a simple narrative with a simple solution. And suing the federal government is a way to take veto power into the hands of

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<sup>15</sup> Howe, Amy. “One of Trump’s Signature Immigration Policies Is Back before the Supreme Court.” SCOTUSblog, April 26, 2022. <https://www.scotusblog.com/2022/04/one-of-trumps-signature-immigration-policies-is-back-before-the-supreme-court/>.

<sup>16</sup> “Governor Abbott Statement on Supreme Court Decision to Reinstate 'Remain in Mexico' Policy.” Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott, August 25, 2021. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-statement-on-supreme-court-decision-to-reinstate-remain-in-mexico-policy>.

<sup>17</sup> “Metering and Asylum Turnbacks.” American Immigration Council, September 2, 2021. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/metering-and-asylum-turnbacks>.

Luce, Kirsten, and Eileen Sullivan. “How Asylum Seekers Cross the Border.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, June 5, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/us/politics/border-migrants-asylum.html>.

states, and this reinstatement is an early victory for Abbott’s immigration federalism.

Almost two months into Operation Lone Star, Governor Abbott made his next efforts to escalate the operation and attract attention in two big ways. First, on June 1, 2021, he declared a state of emergency giving him powers akin to those in a natural disaster at the state level. Abbott then used this power to raise the penalty associated with trespassing, as a law enforced at the state level, and direct state police to arrest migrants under these charges. Abbott named this policy “arrest and jail” which he juxtaposes with federal policy that he calls “catch and release”.<sup>18</sup> And second, on June 16, 2021 Abbott announced his plan to build a Texas/Mexico border wall. Abbott made an initial “down payment” from funds available through the state of emergency and opened a crowd fund campaign to which people can donate money to help build the wall.<sup>19</sup> Both of these efforts pushed the boundaries of what is within his power as governor to enforce migration. I discuss the effects of them separately.

Governor Abbott’s approach of detaining migrants on trespassing charges had a few immediate consequences—first, jails near the border in Texas became overcrowded, as they experienced a much greater volume of detainees than they are accustomed. The overcrowding was not just based on the volume of people though, as the capacity for county courts to process cases was also overextended, meaning that people spend weeks in jails without conviction, a constitutional violation.<sup>20</sup> The overflowing of jails and ongoing detention mobilized a civil society backlash, as non-governmental organizations (i.e., the ACLU of Texas) and public

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<sup>18</sup> Barbaro, Michael, Rob Szytko, Olivia Natt, Eric Krupke, Rachel Quester, Lisa Tobin, Lisa Chow, et al. “Inside Operation Lone Star.” The Daily. The New York Times, May 19, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/podcasts/the-daily/texas-mexico-border-greg-abbott.html?showTranscript=1>.

<sup>19</sup> “Governor Abbott Announces Border Wall Construction Strategy.” Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott. June 16, 2021 <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-announces-border-wall-construction-strategy>.

<sup>20</sup> McCullough, Jolie. “Texas Judge Opens Door for Widespread Constitutional Challenges to Gov. Greg Abbott’s Border Initiative.” The Texas Tribune, January 14, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/01/13/texas-migrant-arrest-border-security/>.

defenders advocated for the rights of migrants and began to seek legal challenges to this policy. An additional consequence from this chaotic incarceration, was that for some migrants seeking asylum it skirted Title 42, a Trump era immigration expulsion policy based on public health grounds and opened the possibility for them to wait in the US to have their asylum cases heard. So indirectly, Abbott offered a path for some migrants to stay in the country. While this unintended consequence benefitted some, many people still must wait months for charges to be filed against them before they then can then wait for their trials.<sup>21</sup> This has been an ongoing saga, and some counties have opposed trespassing charges, as one judge in Travis County declared the detention unconstitutional, and others, like Kinney County have enthusiastically followed Abbott's orders.<sup>22</sup>

The first person to finally have a court hearing from the “arrest and jail” policy, was Lester Hidalgo Aguilar in May 2022 in Kinney County. Hidalgo Aguilar had actually spent most of his childhood in the US but returned to Honduras in his 20s after a run in with the law and “voluntarily” leaving the country. Hidalgo Aguilar raised a family in Honduras, but after facing political persecution in Honduras, he sought asylum in Mexico. However, he was recently fleeing Mexico to the US after being targeted by cartels, who had already kidnapped and tortured him. The robust effort to prosecute Hidalgo Aguilar led to journalists calling the court case a spectacle.<sup>23</sup> Despite the charge of trespassing on private property, the prosecution focused on illegal immigration in their arguments. Hidalgo Aguilar was found guilty of trespassing and

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<sup>21</sup> Flores, Adolfo. “Gov. Greg Abbott's Operation to Arrest Immigrants at the Texas Border Is Actually Helping Some Asylum-Seekers Stay in the Country.” BuzzFeed News. BuzzFeed News, December 12, 2021. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adolfoflores/texas-lone-star-asylum-seekers>.

<sup>22</sup> Scherer, Jasper. “How Abbott's Border Crackdown Is Backfiring, Giving More Migrants a Clearer Path to the U.S.” Houston Chronicle, January 22, 2022. <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/How-Gov-Abbott-s-border-arrests-help-some-16788451.php>.

<sup>23</sup> McCullough, Jolie. “A Minor Trespassing Case Gives Gov. Greg Abbott's Border Initiative Its First Courtroom Win.” The Texas Tribune. The Texas Tribune, May 10, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/05/10/texas-border-migrant-trespassing-trial/>.

sentenced with the maximum, one year of jail time (eight months of which he had already served before his trial) after which he will face deportation. The border spectacle and the villainization of migrants is often spoken about in terms of many people, but this example shows how it impacts individuals, deprived of their right to have their experience validated as it may counter the official narrative.

Abbott never explicitly outlines what he considered to be Biden’s “open border policies”, but in announcing the Texas/Mexico border wall, Abbott makes clear that by secure borders, he means to arrest migrants and build a wall. Walls are not novel, but in recent years, invoking a wall has become a way of tapping into support from former president Donald Trump and his followers, which may be especially important to Abbott as he faces republican primary candidates to his right. In the game of escalation, building a wall has become the paramount symbol of willingness to be tough on unauthorized immigration and smuggling of drugs into the US. Key missing facts in this narrative are how much contraband is smuggled through official checkpoints upon which a border wall would have no impact, and the sort of push (violence) and pull (US need for labor) factors that drive immigration to the US in the first place.

Within weeks of Governor Abbott’s declaration of the border wall, he has captured national attention, and Texas received some high-profile visitors. First, on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Vice President Kamala Harris visited El Paso and toured the border patrol facility and processing center. The Biden-Harris administration had been promoting a few different narratives at this point: 1) that they inherited a “broken, gutted immigration system”<sup>24</sup>, 2) their approach to

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<sup>24</sup> Barragán, James. “In First Trip to U.S.-Mexico Border as Vice President, Kamala Harris Focuses on Causes of Immigration.” The Texas Tribune. The Texas Tribune, June 25, 2021. <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/06/25/kamala-harris-texas-mexico-border-immigration/>.

immigration is more human, “thoughtful and effective”<sup>25</sup>, and 3) that they are addressing the “root causes” of immigration, i.e., through foreign aid. The latter point was illustrated by Harris’s June 7, 2021 speech in Guatemala where she brazenly said to potential migrants— “do not come.”<sup>26</sup> This rhetoric was in addition to a foreign aid pledge, but is contradictory to the administrations “more humane” approach, showing that they are not impervious to border games—they play them as well. And a highly broadcasted remark like that, is meant to show a kind of tough on unauthorized immigration posture.

As Harris visited Guatemala and Mexico, republicans had been criticizing her for seemingly avoiding the US/Mexico border. And by the time she made the trip to Texas, she was criticized by republicans for visiting El Paso, rather than the Rio Grande Valley. Abbott for example, claimed that Harris was “ignoring the real problem areas along our southern border that are not protected by the border wall and are being overrun by the federal government's ill-thought-out open border policies.”<sup>27</sup> It is true that El Paso is an area more friendly to democrats, they elected not to participate in Operation Lone Star. And unlike the two other high-profile visitors, Harris was not accompanied by the Texas governor. The image driven nature of border politics keeps the Biden administration and Governor Abbott in opposition to each other. Even though the Biden administration to this point has not done much to ease the burden on people trying to immigrate to the US, the democratic party represents a pro-immigrant stance, and the republican party represents securing the border. For the democratic party, this is a stereotype

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<sup>25</sup> Keith, Tamara. “Harris Visits the Southern Border after Trying to Keep the Focus Away from It.” NPR. NPR, June 25, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/25/1009939218/harris-is-visiting-the-southern-border-after-trying-to-keep-the-focus-away-from->.

<sup>26</sup> Naylor, Brian, and Tamara Keith. “Kamala Harris Tells Guatemalans Not to Migrate to the United States.” NPR, June 8, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/07/1004074139/harris-tells-guatemalans-not-to-migrate-to-the-united-states>.

<sup>27</sup> “Governor Abbott Statement on Vice President Harris' Upcoming Visit to Texas' Southern Border.” Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott, June 23, 2021. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-statement-on-vice-president-harris-upcoming-visit-to-texas-southern-border>.



more than a fact, as the border spectacle makes politics towards immigrants center on enforcement rather than expanding citizenship or asylum in a way that could be considered pro-immigrant.

The second high-profile guest visited on June 30, and unlike Vice President Harris, former President Donald Trump visited the Rio Grande Valley. At the tour Abbott gave former President Trump of the border, the governor spoke:

In just five months, the Biden Administration has done everything it can to reverse President Trump's border strategy, and their open border policies have led to a disaster at our southern border. Because of President Biden's outright refusal to secure the border, the State of Texas is stepping up to continue the work of the Trump administration by building a wall and restoring law and order along the border. The State of Texas is grateful for our shared commitment and partnership with former President Trump to secure the border and keep our communities safe.<sup>28</sup>

Calls to secure the border have always relied on a border fiction that claims that the US/Mexico border was at some point secure and is even possible to secure (Andreas 2000). The border has never been under control, it just was not an area of huge concern. And because it is impossible to control completely, we see reoccurring calls to secure the border in bigger and more elaborate ways. Thus, the narrative becomes that the border is insecure not because of its size, US need for labor, and direness of situations that migrants are fleeing, but because no one has tried hard enough to secure it. This vision is how Trump's border wall gained such popularity, as he was finally going to secure the border with his border wall, and he as the builder/entrepreneur president was finally the man to do it (Åshild and Oztig 2021). And now after Trump raised the bar to a full and complete wall, politicians who are following in his footsteps see anything less than building a wall as "open border".

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<sup>28</sup> "Governor Abbott Hosts 45th President Donald J. Trump for Border Security Briefing, Border Wall Tour in Rio Grande Valley." Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott, June 30, 2021.  
<https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-hosts-45th-president-donald-j-trump-for-border-security-briefing-border-wall-tour-in-rio-grande-valley>.

The last high-profile guest to the border, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, visited one month later on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Beyond their party affiliation, what the two governors share is the ambition to run for president. These theatrical politics are an occasion for political entrepreneurialism—where local politics can find a national stage. During his stay, DeSantis made the promise to deploy Florida law enforcement officers to Texas to help assist the operation in securing the border. The kind of allyship that is otherwise accustomed to military interventions, emphasizing how the republican politicians see this intervention to be fighting an “invasion”, and they are banding together against the federal government.

After the high-profile visitors and the announcement of the wall, at the end of July 2021, Abbott makes two more moves to escalate the operation. First, the deployment of more Texas National Guard soldiers to the border and second, Executive Order GA-37 to restrict transportation of migrants. Deploying the Texas National Guard to the border has been done before, for example in 2014, former Texas Governor Rick Perry deployed 1000 National Guard soldiers to the border to assist with his “Operation Strong Safety” in response to the arrival of unaccompanied minors arriving at the border. Perry used very similar language as Abbott at the time—complaining about federal government’s “failure to secure the border”, speaking about cartels, and referring to the border as a war zone.<sup>29</sup> Reporting at the time, however, showed that the measures taken—enhanced security and personnel—actually made residents feel less safe.<sup>30</sup> This operation also preceded Perry’s 2016 presidential run, demonstrating this template for local politicians to go to extreme and spectacular measures to capture attention for their party and personal political career, through largely image driven politics. Escalating personnel is a way of showing how serious politicians are about border enforcement. But as with any border games,

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<sup>29</sup> Bosque, Melissa del. “The Surge.” The Texas Observer, July 28, 2021. <https://www.texasobserver.org/the-surge/>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

escalation of enforcement usually leads to more escalation of enforcement.

The rationale behind the Executive Order GA-37, restricting transportation of migrants, was that migrants coming across the border would spread COVID-19 around Texas. At this point in the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Abbott created a policy that prohibited mask or vaccination mandates.<sup>31</sup> Aside from the fact that we know the US already had very wide-spread infection rates, the governor's approach to the pandemic proves the concern for COVID-19 spread to be disingenuous. As there is no reason that he would be concerned with the spread of infection coming from migrants versus citizens, other than that the former bolsters his anti-immigrant agenda. GA-37 stipulated a vehicle suspected of transporting migrants would be stopped and rerouted "back to its point of origin or a port of entry."<sup>32</sup> The immediate consequence of this was that migrants could not board Greyhound buses or other privately contracted vehicles by the federal government. With this policy, therefore Operation Lone Star officially began impeding the federal government's regulation of immigration.

On July 29, the next day after GA-37 was issued, Attorney General Merrick Garland wrote Governor Abbott a letter urging him to rescind the Executive Order. The Attorney General called the Order both "dangerous and unlawful", citing precedent that states cannot interfere with the activities of the federal government and threatening that if the order was not rescinded, then the Department of Justice would pursue "legal remedies."<sup>33</sup> To this, Abbott immediately "fire[d] back" at the Attorney General with a letter claiming that "It is clear that the Biden

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<sup>31</sup> Montgomery, Dave. "Gov. Greg Abbott Bars Mandates for Vaccinations and Masks in Texas." The New York Times, August 1, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/31/world/greg-abbott-mask-vaccine-mandate.html>.

<sup>32</sup> "Governor Abbott Issues Executive Order Restricting Transportation of Migrants Due to Covid-19." Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott, July 28, 2021. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-issues-executive-order-restricting-transportation-of-migrants-due-to-covid-19>.

<sup>33</sup> Garland, Merrick B. Letter to The Honorable Greg Abbott. "Attorney General Garland's Letter to The Honorable Greg Abbott," July 29, 2021. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/page/file/1418991/download>.

Administration fundamentally misunderstands what is truly happening at the Texas-Mexico border.”<sup>34</sup> And in his letter, Abbott claimed that “No doubt, the Constitution authorizes the federal government, not states, to administer the immigration process. However, the Constitution does not allow the Biden Administration to fabricate its own immigration laws.”<sup>35</sup> Governor Abbott is citing the notion that Congress is the only body that has the right to create immigration laws, however the president can issue executive orders that set priorities for immigration enforcement. And we know that Abbott respects this because the Trump era policies that he praises—building a wall, Migrant Protection Protocols, and Title 42—were all issued as Executive Orders. Thus, his opposition is not the source of laws, but rather his perception and the political party that created them.

Within the week GA-37 was issued, a federal judge temporarily blocked the Order for violating the Supremacy Clause of the constitution. Simultaneously, the ACLU filed a lawsuit against Abbott on behalf of migrant shelters, which was later combined with the DOJ lawsuit.<sup>36</sup> And finally a federal court ruled that the Governor has the right to make provisions to impact the spread of COVID-19, but that Abbott has not demonstrated that this Order will achieve this goal, ending GA-37.<sup>37</sup> At this point, we have seen the Texas sue the federal government and vice versa for their attempts at dismantling or enacting policy, respectively. This push and pull is the mediation of the state and federal government fighting over the contested domain of immigration

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<sup>34</sup> “Governor Abbott Fires Back at U.S. Attorney General Garland's Response to Executive Order GA-37.” Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott, July 29, 2021. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-fires-back-at-u.s-attorney-general-garlands-response-to-executive-order-ga-37>.

<sup>35</sup> “Governor Abbott Sends Letter to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland Regarding Executive Order GA-37.” Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott, June 30, 2021. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-sends-letter-to-u.s-attorney-general-merrick-garland-regarding-executive-order-ga-37>.

<sup>36</sup> Martinez, Aaron. “Federal Judge Grants Injunction Stopping Gov. Abbott's Order Restricting Migrant Transportation.” El Paso Times. El Paso Times, August 26, 2021. <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/immigration/2021/08/26/judge-injunction-stops-greg-abbott-order-restricting-migrant-transportation/5607776001/>.

<sup>37</sup> US and Annunciation House v. Texas (United States District Court for the Western District of Texas El Paso Division August 26, 2021).

policy. The decisions that these courts make impact the examples of policies, but they do not stop the iterations of attempts to challenge what is possible at the state level.

The next interplay between Texas and the federal government, happened in September 2021, as many migrants of Haitian origin began arriving at a port of entry bridge in Del Rio. According to Val Verde County Sheriff Joe Frank Martinez, many of the people there were waiting their turn to submit their claim for asylum.<sup>38</sup> Estimates of the number of people there range from 8,400 to over 16,000—the highest estimates from the Governor’s office. On September 17, CBP announced that they would temporarily close the Del Rio port of entry and reroute traffic 57 miles east to the next closest point of entry. The Biden Administration said they would send 400 CBP officers to Del Rio to take “urgent humanitarian actions”—including distribution of water, towels, and portable toilets in Del Rio, and charter five to eight flights per day to deport migrants back to Haiti through San Antonio, invoking Title 42 to expel migrants on public health grounds.<sup>39</sup> This decision however, was quickly blocked by a federal judge, citing that Title 42 does not offer grounds to deport families seeking asylum. Governor Abbott swiftly came in to critique the Biden administration for “flip-flopping” and refusing to close ports of entry.<sup>40</sup> This is a moment where the governor and president may have been aligned were it not for the governor’s specific campaign against the president. This shows how the exact efforts of the federal government are not necessarily important. Abbott’s operation is created in opposition

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<sup>38</sup> Garcia, Uriel J., and Jolie McCullough. “Gov. Abbott Backpedals on Pledge to Shut down Border Crossings, Blames Biden Administration for Confusion.” *El Paso Times*. *El Paso Times*, September 16, 2021. <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/2021/09/16/gov-greg-abbott-orders-border-ports-entry-shut-down/8369229002/>.

<sup>39</sup> Katz, Dan, Joey Palacios, and Carolina Cuellar. “Biden Administration Shuts down Del Rio, Texas Ports of Entry as Migrant Encampment Grows to 14,000.” *TPR*. *TPR*, September 18, 2021. <https://www.tpr.org/border-immigration/2021-09-17/u-s-closes-del-rio-texas-ports-of-entry-as-more-than-12-000-migrants-wait-underneath-international-bridge>.

<sup>40</sup> “Governor Abbott Statement on Biden Administration Refusal to Close Ports of Entry.” Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott, September 16, 2021. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-statement-on-biden-administration-refusal-to-close-ports-of-entry>.

to Biden, so the only time he comments on Biden is to list his talking points on the president's shortcomings.

Soon after the clash of policy over the Del Rio port of entry, Governor Abbott requests a declaration of a federal emergency to mobilize federal resources, which the federal government denies. This is not the end of the situation in Del Rio, however, as a media spectacle begins to ignite as images and videos of Border Patrol officers on horseback corralling Haitian migrants, and cracking reins like whips, go viral.<sup>41</sup> These images spurn criticism from all directions—high ranking democrats and organizations such as the NAACP and Human Rights Watch declared the response inhumane. Articles emerged discussing the racist history of the border patrol and how Haitian migrants have been discriminated against for decades.<sup>42</sup> And others plainly criticized the situation for being out of control. In response, Abbott held a press conference in Del Rio, where he declared his intention to continue funneling resources to support border communities. After his request for a FEMA disaster declaration was denied, Abbott called this the federal government's refusal to support border communities impacted by this crisis. After a media spectacle relating to the border, it leaves a question for what officials will do. Abbott tried to ignite a force against the federal government but ended up facing criticism himself.

After the incident in Del Rio made international news, Fox News host, Tucker Carlson,

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<sup>41</sup> Sullivan, Eileen, and Zolan Kanno-Youngs. "Images of Border Patrol's Treatment of Haitian Migrants Prompt Outrage." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, September 22, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/21/us/politics/haitians-border-patrol-photos.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Aguilera, Jasmine. "How History Is Repeating Itself for Haitian Migrants Trying to Enter the U.S." *Time*. *Time*, September 30, 2021. <https://time.com/6102229/haitian-migrants-us-border-texas/>.  
Craven, Julia. "The Ugly History behind Those Border Agents Chasing Haitian Migrants on Horseback." *Slate Magazine*. *Slate*, September 25, 2021. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/09/border-patrol-horseback-haitian-migrants-del-rio.html>.

Morrison, Aaron, Astrid Galvan, and Jasen Lo. "Haitians See History of Racist Policies in Migrant Treatment." *PBS. Public Broadcasting Service*, September 24, 2021. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/haitians-see-history-of-racist-policies-in-migrant-treatment>.

called out Abbott for not mobilizing the Texas National Guard, and invited Abbott's republican challengers onto his program to discuss what they would do differently if elected. Not long after the program aired, Abbott sent an additional 2,500 Texas National Guardsmen be sent to the border in October. And soon after, the governor appeared on Carlson's show for the first time and said that an additional 6,500 Guard members and state troopers would be sent to the border, for a total of 10,000.<sup>43</sup> By this point, what had previously been a volunteer mission that Texas National Guard soldiers could opt into, became a mandatory mission with only two days' notice for soldiers to report to their assignment. Many reporters and guardsmen cited the proximity of the Tucker Carlson episode and Abbott's escalation, speculating that his upcoming primary race as the reason for this extreme level of escalation in enforcement.

From this moment, criticism begins to circulate not only from people who oppose Governor Abbott, but also from people who had previously supported him. Image driven politics within Abbott's border games become more contentious at this point, as peoples' lives were uprooted by the deployment, and they were forced to work in a poorly planned operation.<sup>44</sup> When people feel material consequences, such as not receiving their pay and being stationed far from their families like the national guard soldiers did, the border spectacle does not solve their problems. Abbott is tried to show the lengths he is willing to go by stationing 10,000 people along the border, but as soon as these people share their stories of how horrible the conditions are, that they feel their time is wasted, it reveals the emptiness behind the efforts. The operation is meant to look strong but has little strategy behind it. As criticism began to circulate regarding

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<sup>43</sup> Craven, Julia. "The Ugly History behind Those Border Agents Chasing Haitian Migrants on Horseback." *Slate Magazine*. Slate, September 25, 2021. <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/09/border-patrol-horseback-haitian-migrants-del-rio.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Hernandez, Emily. "What Is Operation Lone Star? Gov. Greg Abbott's Controversial Border Mission, Explained." *The Texas Tribune*. The Texas Tribune, March 30, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/03/30/operation-lone-star-texas-explained/>.

the National Guard deployment, criticism began to stick to other aspects of the operation as well.

In December 2021, Abbott unveiled the first section of his wall. For Abbott, this is considered a huge success, but it also inspires criticism as a waste of budget. A borderland wildlife program coordinator said, “The border is once again being used as a political football. When is it going to stop?”<sup>45</sup> And activists have highlighted that the wall that costs \$27 million per mile is easily mounted with a \$5 ladder. Even a Texas border patrol agent noted that “Ladders and walls go together like peas and carrots”<sup>46</sup> A wall has always been an inflammatory measure—people either love it or they hate it. For Abbott, who mostly is trying to capture attention, it is the kind of spectacular measure that exactly fits his needs. Beyond environmental impact and wasted money, people oppose it on the basis that it is a monument to exclusion, which is exactly why people love it. Because of Trump’s wall, anti-immigrant measures have to include building a wall, regardless of its ineffectiveness.

At the federal level, Biden asked the Supreme Court to review a new argument for ending MPP, noting that federal policy says that migrants “may” return migrants to Mexico or Canada during immigration proceedings, and that the executive branch retains discretionary power on how to enforce this.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the Biden administration moved in April to end Title 42, which had Border Patrol immediately expelling migrants on public health grounds. Each of these moves rallied support and opposition from different states who postured as being pro- or against

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<sup>45</sup> Sanchez, Sandra. “Texas Governor Shows off 1st Section State-Funded Border Wall Recently Put up in Rio Grande Valley.” BorderReport. BorderReport, December 19, 2021. <https://www.borderreport.com/immigration/the-border-wall/texas-governor-shows-off-1st-section-state-funded-border-wall-recently-put-up-in-rio-grande-valley/>.

<sup>46</sup> Nelsen, Aaron. “A Section of Trump Border Wall in South Texas Cost \$27 Million a Mile. It’s Being Foiled by \$5 Ladders.” Texas Monthly, April 21, 2021. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/trump-border-wall-ladders/>.

<sup>47</sup> Hamm, Andrew. “‘Remain in Mexico’ and Texas’ Anti-Abortion Law.” SCOTUSblog, January 13, 2022. <https://www.scotusblog.com/2022/01/remain-in-mexico-and-texas-anti-abortion-law/>.



the changes.<sup>48</sup> In addition to another lawsuit directed at the government, Abbott retaliated with what he called “aggressive actions.” These actions included sending migrants to Washington DC on chartered buses and planes, adding razor wire to areas of the border, equipping DPS troops and National Guard soldiers with riot gear, and inspecting every commercial vehicle coming into the US from Mexico.<sup>49</sup> Governor Abbott then began transporting hundreds of migrants to Washington DC and preparing for a “mass migrant influx” in response to the end of Title 42.

In May, a federal court ruled to keep Title 42 in effect and number of migrants sent to DC from Texas remained small. After a couple of weeks of extreme traffic from thorough inspections of commercial vehicles, this level of scrutiny was abandoned, and some even called the traffic from the inspections a fiasco causing an economic dent.<sup>50</sup> Abbott was considered “unapologetic” in reaction to the traffic and left some speculating as to what he will do next. Texas State Senator Sen. Juan “Chuy” Hinojosa was quoted: “As long as the Biden administration does not address it rightly — proper immigration controls, proper manpower and equipment — Gov. Abbott is gonna continue pushing the envelope and keep focusing on this issue to get the attention of Washington.”<sup>51</sup> This statement, demonstrates the performative goals of Operation Lone Star. Abbott is trying to attract the attention of the federal government and general public to aid him in pushing the administration to action. Therefore, the efforts remained

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<sup>48</sup> García, Uriel J. “Judge Blocks Biden Administration from Lifting Public Health Order Used to Quickly Expel Migrants.” *The Texas Tribune*, May 20, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/05/20/title-42-border-judge-ruling-migrants/>.

Howe, Amy. “One of Trump's Signature Immigration Policies Is Back before the Supreme Court.” *SCOTUSblog*, April 26, 2022. <https://www.scotusblog.com/2022/04/one-of-trumps-signature-immigration-policies-is-back-before-the-supreme-court/>.

<sup>49</sup> “Governor Abbott Takes Aggressive Action to Secure the Border as President Biden Ends Title 42 Expulsions.” *Office of the Governor | Greg Abbott*, April 6, 2022. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-takes-aggressive-action-to-secure-the-border-as-president-biden-ends-title-42-expulsions>.

<sup>50</sup> Svitek, Patrick. “Some Texas Republicans Push for Gov. Greg Abbott to Use State Personnel to Deport Migrants.” *The Texas Tribune*, April 22, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/04/22/greg-abbott-immigration-invasion-declaration/>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

focused on capturing attention rather than achieving a specific goal, i.e., inspecting vehicles. And fortunately for Abbott, this can be done in a shorter amount of time, such that he can alleviate the negative feedback that inhibiting economic activity incites towards him. After the traffic incident, Abbott found a way to lever this into momentum towards his goals by entering into agreements with governors of northern Mexican states. The deal was that Abbott would reduce traffic if the governors would do their part to slow migration into Texas.

In Abbott’s narrative, all smuggling happens through the unmanned and unwallled sections of the border, rather than through official border check points. However, we know that smuggling, especially of drugs, happens through official checkpoints as well.<sup>52</sup> Yet, the level of scrutiny to check every vehicle is untenable for the level of commerce that these ports of entry facilitate. This creates the paradox that politicians are unable to regulate but must demonstrate the will to do so. And then in June, a tragedy makes national news as an abandoned tractor-trailer is found in San Antonio with 46 dead migrants, and seven gravely ill who later died at the hospital. This has been called the deadliest migrant smuggling incident in US history.<sup>53</sup> This kind of horrific accident is only possible because of the great lengths people must go to in their attempt to enter the US. And this kind of morbid spectacle fits into Jason De León’s definition of “necroviolence”—deaths that promote fear and are effectively violence inflicted upon migrants by the state (De León 2015). Rather than interpreting this tragedy as a horrific accident, we can see it as horror inflicted upon migrating people directly as consequence of immigration policy.

The *Texas Tribune* aptly contrasts Governor Abbott’s statement about this incident with a

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<sup>52</sup> Gomez, Alan. “Fact-Checking Trump Officials: Most Drugs Enter Us through Legal Ports of Entry, Not Vast, Open Border.” USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, January 16, 2019. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/01/16/fact-check-mike-pence-donald-trump-drugs-crossing-southern-border-wall/2591279002/>.

<sup>53</sup> Formby, Brandon. “Two Men Indicted in Connection with Deaths of 53 Migrants Who Were Found in Tractor-Trailer.” The Texas Tribune. The Texas Tribune, July 21, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/07/20/texas-migrant-smuggling-trailer/>.

statement regarding a similar tragedy in 2017 where 10 people died. Under Biden, Abbott tweeted: “These deaths are on Biden. They are the result of his deadly open border policies. They show the deadly consequences of his refusal to enforce the law.” While under Trump, Abbott stated: “Human trafficking is an epidemic that Texas is working to eradicate [...] To that end, Texas will continue to provide protection for the victims who have been robbed of their most basic rights, and bring down the full weight of the law for the perpetrators of this despicable crime.”<sup>54</sup> Abbott faced criticism from Texas Democrats for politicizing this tragedy, as he blamed Biden for the deaths. Following the tragedy, Abbott resumed increased inspections of vehicles coming in the border and increased the funding for Operation Lone Star to 4 billion dollars for the two-year state budget, nearly five times the amount of previous budgets.<sup>55</sup>

By July, the Supreme Court upholds Biden’s authority to end Title 42, and the number of migrants to reach Washington DC from Texas reaches the thousands. This begins to capture the attention of DC Mayor, Muriel Bowser, New York City Mayor, Eric Adams, and California Governor, Gavin Newsom.<sup>56</sup> This kind of attention brings partisan polemics to a national stage in a way that rallies both support for politicians as well as for their opponents—as it attracts the attention of constituents and outside supporters.<sup>57</sup> The two mayors criticize Governor Abbott, to which he responds that their criticism would be more aptly directed at the federal government. And although at this moment, chartered buses had not been sent to New York City, at the

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<sup>54</sup> Barragán, James. “Greg Abbott Blames Joe Biden for Migrant Deaths, but the Governor's Own Border Security Efforts Have Fallen Short.” *The Texas Tribune*, June 29, 2022.  
<https://www.texastribune.org/2022/06/28/migrant-truck-deaths-greg-abbott-border/>.

<sup>55</sup> “Texas Gov. Greg Abbott Orders Truck Inspections at Border after Migrant Deaths.” *Dallas News*, July 8, 2022.  
<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2022/06/29/texas-gov-abbott-orders-truck-inspections-at-border-after-53-migrants-die-in-semi/>.

<sup>56</sup> Harris, Cayla. “Attacks from Democrats on Both Coasts Show Abbott at Center of 'GOP Discussion Nationally'.” *Houston Chronicle*. *San Antonio Express-News*, July 23, 2022.  
[https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/abbott-democrats-attack-17323554.php?utm\\_campaign=premiumchron\\_breakingnews\\_20220723](https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/abbott-democrats-attack-17323554.php?utm_campaign=premiumchron_breakingnews_20220723).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

beginning of August they began to be sent there as well. New York City Mayor Eric Adams said at a press release that in response, he is considering taking a bus load of New Yorkers to Texas to have them do some door knocking encouraging people to vote for candidates other than Greg Abbott for governor. On a Fox News program, *The Faulkner Focus*, this clip of Adams was aired before welcoming Abbott, who when asked how he would respond to the criticism that he is using migrants as political pawns noted: “New York is a sanctuary city. Mayor Adams said they welcome in illegal immigrants, but now that they have to deal with the reality of it, they’re suddenly flummoxed and cannot handle it.”<sup>58</sup>

The busing of migrants to the cities are some of Abbott’s more successful games. It is clearly a tactic to get national attention and appear as a leader. And in Washington DC and New York, the mayors are overwhelmed by the number of arriving migrants. Mayor Bowser requested the Defense Department send the National Guard to assist the efforts in Washington DC and in both Washington DC and New York the response has largely been managed by nonprofits, as the cities lack this kind of infrastructure.<sup>59</sup> And by August 4, the mayors began to echo Abbott’s call for federal action. Yet they did so trying to remain in opposition to Abbott, as Adams’ office said “Instead of a photo op at the border, we hope Governor Abbott will focus his energy and resources on providing support and resources to asylum seekers in Texas as we have been hard at work doing in New York City.”<sup>60</sup> And Abbott criticized Adams back calling him a hypocrite and saying that he is pressing Adams to “walk the walk”.<sup>61</sup> This feud has successfully kept Abbott’s

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<sup>58</sup> “Gov. Abbott Discusses Bussing Migrants to DC & NYC.” Broadcast. *The Faulkner Focus*. Fox News, August 10, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbznXnKJGVE>

<sup>59</sup> Jordan, Miriam. “G.O.P. Governors Cause Havoc by Busing Migrants to East Coast.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, August 4, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/04/us/migrants-buses-washington-texas.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Neukam, Stephen. “Gov. Greg Abbott Sends Five More Buses of Migrants to New York, Escalating Feud with Mayor Eric Adams.” *The Texas Tribune*, August 24, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/08/24/greg-abbott-eric-adams-migrant-busing-new-york/>.

name in the headlines ahead of his reelection against Beto O'Rourke. It is unclear what will come of this, the theatrics between feuding democrats and republicans has boosted Abbott's notoriety, but this always has the potential to come back at him for not doing enough.

So much discourse within border politics is performative—words create perceptions and attitudes about what is happening along the border and about immigrants. A final border game within Operation Lone Star that I need to highlight is the discourse of invasion. The constitution directly mentions the federal government's responsibility to protect the country from invasion, so it is not a territory easily negotiated by those seeking to widen the state's capacity to regulate immigration. State level politicians in Texas and Arizona had been using the word invasion over the last two years, while Abbott's office was specifically more cautious, as they did not want it to impede their Operation Lone Star. However, by July 7, Abbott's office issued Executive Order GA-41, specifically claiming that the federal government is failing to protect the states against an invasion, and uses this basis to “authorize and empower Texas National Guard and the Texas Department of Public Safety to respond to this illegal immigration by apprehending immigrants who cross the border between ports of entry or commit other violations of federal law, and to return those illegal immigrants to the border at a point of entry”.<sup>62</sup> The EO cites both the constitution, Texas law, and Supreme Court opinion in *Arizona v. United States*, to declare this effort legally precedent. This EO still skirted a declaration of an invasion, which would cross a boundary in domain, but the threat of this kind of escalation remained.

Counties in Texas have begun to declare an invasion, but Abbott has yet to do so.<sup>63</sup> The

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<sup>62</sup> Austin, Texas. Governor of the State of Texas [Greg Abbott] . Executive Order GA 41. Relating to returning illegal immigrants to the border. 7 July 2022. <https://lrl.texas.gov/scanned/govdocs/Greg%20Abbott/2022/GA-41.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> Bethany Blankley | The Center Square contributor. “Ninth Texas County Declares Invasion at Southern Border.” The Center Square, August 9, 2022. [https://www.thecentersquare.com/texas/ninth-texas-county-declares-invasion-at-southern-border/article\\_63eb0bf2-1815-11ed-821a-57a5bfbe1716.html](https://www.thecentersquare.com/texas/ninth-texas-county-declares-invasion-at-southern-border/article_63eb0bf2-1815-11ed-821a-57a5bfbe1716.html).

momentum that he has built in Operation Lone Star over the last year and a half is beginning to carry itself. The operation opposes the federal government, and he has garnered support and opposition both within his state and outside of it. But because of the way that a border spectacle operates, Abbott is never completely in control. He will always not be doing enough for extremists, as he incites fears that demand never-ending escalation of enforcement. A final declaration of an invasion could put the whole operation into question of violating federal supremacy. How much further will Operation Lone Star go before it crosses a line that gets shut down by the federal government? Will it have expanded the potential for enforcement at the state level in the process? It has been reported that the Department of Justice is pursuing a civil rights lawsuit against the operation on behalf of migrants and National Guard soldiers. How the operation will end will certainly impact the future of immigration enforcement at the state level, and how it is perceived will likely be informed by fear and anxiety from the border spectacle.

## Conclusion

On March 9, 2021, Governor Greg Abbott held a press release to discuss his recently launched Operation Lone Star. To the last question of the session, “If you were president in 2024, which some of us hope that you are, what’s the first thing that you would do to enact something down here?” Abbott answered, “Secure the border. Period.”<sup>64</sup> What does it mean to secure the border? What would it take for the border to feel secure? As Andreas highlights, if undocumented immigrants and illicit drugs are the problem, then focusing on demand would be the solution (Andreas 2000). Instead, we have increasing escalation of enforcement and politicians who compete to show how tough they are on immigration. As I have demonstrated in this paper, immigration is an arena of image-driven politics and promoting the narrative that the border as “insecure” can be valuable for political entrepreneurs. Because this insecurity is experienced more in the imaginary than reality, the border cannot really be secured. And as the border spectacle is heightened, this becomes even more true.

Greg Abbott’s initial announcement of Operation Lone Star came only weeks into Joe Biden’s presidency. Despite this, Operation Lone Star is Abbott’s attempt to posture himself in opposition to the president and build notoriety in advance of a potential presidential run. This foray into border games demonstrates a trend of escalation inherent to border spectacle. In a time where republican candidates are vying for former president Donald Trump’s campaign endorsement, extreme and attention-grabbing policy platforms are becoming increasingly common. For example, Arizona republican gubernatorial candidates Kari Lake and Karrin Taylor Robson each proposed a surge of National Guard soldiers and building a wall along the Arizona/Mexico border, but only the former received Trump’s endorsement and won the

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<sup>64</sup> “Gov. Greg Abbott Discusses Texas Border Security Efforts .” Episode. KVUE, March 6, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jm4mZID4Bpg>.

primary. The standard of what it means to take a tough stance on immigration has been raised and will not easily be lowered from this standard.

Abbott's border games have built a national reputation for himself. He has opposed the democratic president and goaded the democratic mayors of DC and New York into echoing his calls for federal action. Border games and spectacle, like those which Abbott promotes, dictate how we speak about immigrants. Today, the discussion is focused on how exclusive to be, not how welcoming. The opposite of an enforcement-oriented approach is not a non-enforcement approach, it would be creating humane pathways for more people to immigrate, and this is not even in the realm of national discourse today.

The border spectacle is an autonomous object. "Deceivers" may have created the spectacle but have little control over it (Debord 1967). Donald Trump was not the first to call for building a border wall, but his wall, Muslim ban, elimination of refugee admissions, and every other attempt to reduce pathways for immigration raised the performative expectations for an immigration restrictionist politician. Andreas published *Border Games*, 22 years ago, and the last decades have shown that the border spectacle and games of escalation have only increased. The border spectacle is a powerful well for politicians to draw from, but it is never fully in their control as they rouse anxiety and hate within the population. So as politicians stir demands for securing the border, they rouse an insatiable desire they will never actually be able to soothe.

The last decade of literature on immigration federalism has focused on how cities have promoted immigrant integration. Yet, the Texas case study shows that we have not moved beyond immigrant restrictionism at the state level that was pioneered through 287(g) and Secure Communities programs. Immigration federalism is an area of performance where politicians try to build notoriety through issue entrepreneurialism and expand the potential of what is possible



to accomplish at the state level. These boundaries are negotiated, and they are challenged through initiatives such as Operation Lone Star. Will immigration federalism continue to progress and fracture federal policy? Partisanship continues to deepen between democrats and republicans, as they have become the “pro-immigrant” party and “anti-immigrant” party. Will these reputations impact future elections? Will we see pro-immigrant discourse emerge on expanding citizenship? What are the long-term consequences of image-driven politics? It is unclear how Operation Lone Star will end, but it will impact the future of how migrants are received and perceived in Texas and the broader US.

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