

NEWSLETTER
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Keep Your Eye on ICE

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The resistance looked immediately victorious and momentous: Last January, facing a kind of invasion by federal agents, the liberal citizens of Minneapolis stood their ground. They forced confrontation after confrontation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol officers, eventually routing them from the city and bringing the mass deportation project of the president's second term to what looked like a humiliating end.

The response was heroic, especially given the purposeful brutality of the campaign, called Operation Metro Surge, which resulted in the killing of two American citizens — and perhaps even more so, given everything we have since learned about the full scale of the surveillance and counterintelligence operation federal agents were running, in real time, against those organizing to stymie them.

The problem is, ICE didn't really disappear when Operation Metro Surge ended in February, and the project of mass deportation wasn't shelved when the Border Patrol chief, Greg Bovino, retired and the Department of Homeland Security secretary, Kristi Noem, was later replaced by Markwayne Mullin. In the summer harshly hawkish immigration enforcement began in earnest again, this time a bit more carefully designed to maximize seizures and deportations rather than blood-and-soil spectacle.

By the numbers, the new strategy has worked. ICE arrests hit a new high in July. Deportations are on track to be higher this fiscal year than last one, and removals of people seized inside the country could easily reach new highs. Alligator Alcatraz, as a Florida detention facility was known, closed in June, but the number of immigrants held in detention by ICE has grown by 75 percent since President Trump returned to office in 2025. In 2024, ICE's operations and support budget was under \$10 billion; in 2025, Trump's signature policy legislation helped allocate more than \$70 billion in additional funding to the agency, including \$45 billion to expand detention capacity. ICE is now the country's best-funded law enforcement agency. "We have never seen the detention system anywhere near this scale or size," said Aaron Reichlin-Melnick of the American Immigration Council. "And it's really crucial to understand that this is a decade-plus-long operation as they are planning it."

The midterms and the next presidential election are obvious speed bumps for those plans, given how much the ICE budget has ballooned under Trump and how much political capital would be required to extend that funding. But in terms of arrests, the damage done this summer swells beyond what was done in any single month leading up to Minneapolis. And yet despite the horrifying scale, the mass deportation project has generated much less public outrage in the second year of Trump's second term, with liberals notching Minneapolis as an incredible victory before turning their attention elsewhere.

When a Maine resident was shot and killed by an ICE officer in July, allegations of the officer's violent past briefly became a minor national news story, then faded into background noise. There was perhaps even less attention paid to a killing in Houston last month, when ICE officers shot a man driving a construction van on his way to a work site. This year a federal judge reviewing officers' claims of being attacked by drivers in Chicago wrote that it was "difficult, if not impossible" to believe their stance that vehicular confrontations with protesters had been defensive maneuvers. Since the start of Trump's second term, at least 10 people have been killed in immigration operations, and dozens more have died in immigration detention.

By February, Trump's approval on immigration fell 12 percentage points below its peak early in his second term, but it now sits comfortably above his overall approval rating, and he retains the support of a large majority of Republicans on the issue. We don't see Democrats storming in to protest deportation hearings much anymore, and we don't even see them spending much time emphasizing the cruel excesses of Trump's border and immigration policies on the campaign trail, either.

This is politics, of course, at least in part. But in the winter, it might have seemed that mass deportation was turning immigration into an issue Democrats might exploit to their advantage, with backlash powering what appeared to be a distaste for ICE and

Customs and Border Protection and growing sympathy for immigrants. In fact, those survey numbers have fallen back over the past year, with American support for immigration lower now than it was at a peak in 2025. And the issue has also collapsed in salience since Metro Surge, particularly if you measure it in headlines, cable news segments and social media virality.

In part, the country has grown less outraged because the Department of Homeland Security has strategically recalibrated its approach, jettisoning the shock-and-awe-style sweeps and instead targeting those it knew how to find — at least in part, seemingly, by going after those who had been complying with immigration policies in ways that made them easily traceable by federal authorities. There's been less emphasis on intimidation of recalcitrant communities and more emphasis on quickly finding and arresting those it knows it can detain and deport. It appears less focused on making ICE sizzle reels lately and, to judge by the relative paucity of citizen documentation, more effective in tracking and suppressing resistance. Operations have gotten faster and more targeted.

As always, the enduring laws of attentional chaos in the Trump era also play a role. Deportation outrage gave way to worry over the Iran war, among other fights and scandals. But I think normalization is coming from the other direction, too, with liberal complacency setting in as the lame-duck mood spreads through Trumpland.

One aspect of the vibe shift against Trump and Trumpism is that even those most outraged about the president and his path of destruction might now see a light at the end of the tunnel, in the form of dismal approval ratings and the coming midterms and then 2028. For a decade, Trump has been unmistakably the main character in American politics, dictating national attention even when out of power. But over the past few months that, too, has changed, with tensions in the Democratic Party and its contest for future leadership becoming more central preoccupations and the fall elections drawing our attention forward in ways that can serve to minimize the damage of the recent past, almost like a camera obscura casting a miniature image, inverted, against an opposite wall.

Of course, the damage has been absolutely immense — to health care and SNAP, to pollution standards and basic expectations of public integrity, to America's standing in the world and its role in global energy markets (not to mention its munitions stockpile), to scientific research and public health. And not least, on the border, where a large-scale deportation program is, even though unfolding somewhat offscreen, producing humanitarian outrages that used to pull liberal America's attention into focus.

ICE is planning to buy electroshock gloves sold with the promise that the jolts will not leave any marks. The Department of Homeland Security is deporting Mexican

nationals to Honduras and Guatemala, even though their native country is perfectly willing to accept them, and will be sending more than 1,000 others to countries in Africa, including ones that the State Department considers unsafe, for what seem to be punitive reasons. In August, Maryam Tahmasebi, an Iranian professor of psychology and statistics in Los Angeles, published an open letter in *The Nation* documenting her experience in a detention center in Texas, where she has spent more than 120 days with her 16-year-old son, separated from her husband. All three were legal permanent residents.

In April, months after the initial deportation surge had subsided, Tahmasebi got a text from her son that his father hadn't arrived to pick him up from school. Eventually she discovered that her husband was being held at an ICE facility in downtown Los Angeles, and he told her he'd been assured that, whatever bureaucratic tangle he'd gotten caught up in — his mother worked with the Iranian hostage takers before he was born — she and their son were safe. The next day, as she prepared to drive her son to school, their car was surrounded by Department of Homeland Security officers, and the two were handcuffed and sent from Los Angeles to Texas, where they've been detained since. "This is bloodline punishment," she wrote; neither she nor her husband has so much as a traffic ticket. "I will end on this: If this could happen to us, a law-abiding family of two professors and a young boy, it can happen to anyone."

Stories like these were available in endless scroll a year ago, stoking liberal outrage almost by the day. The sentiment hasn't grown less true in the meantime, however irregularly we may be clocking it.