

The Border Crisis Is Everyone's Problem. It's Time to Compromise.

Oklahoma Republican Senator James Lankford should be modeled, not punished for being willing to negotiate.

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A model of compromise. *Photographer: Kent Nishimura/Bloomberg*

Republican Senator James Lankford is no moderate. The Baptist preacher from Oklahoma has been the lead Senate negotiator in the effort to update the nation's antiquated immigration laws to deal with the migrant crisis on the southern border.

And yet last weekend, a Trump-aligned faction of the Oklahoma Republican Party got together and voted to censure the conservative lawmaker because he had the audacity to negotiate with Democrats on a potential border deal.

The text of the bill hasn't been released. The confines of the agreement aren't settled. But the prospect that after nearly 40 years Congress might reach a bipartisan agreement on an issue that whips Donald Trump's base into a frenzy and is viewed as one of the country's most pressing by millions of Americans was the kind of forward progress the former president couldn't handle.

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"They were getting ready to pass a very bad bill," Trump told an audience in Las Vegas last week. "And I'll tell you what a bad bill is. I'd rather have no bill than a bad bill."

The head of the Oklahoma GOP dismissed the censure of Lankford as an illegitimate vote. Lankford ignored the dustup. But we shouldn't.

Trump's selfish rejection of the toughest immigration bill in decades is exactly why the system is in shambles, our border is a porous joke and a robust cottage industry of coyotes, fentanyl smugglers, gun cartels and child traffickers have emerged to exploit the openings.

If Trump stands in the way of compromise, he should own this problem.

This is not President Joe Biden's problem alone, nor was it solely Trump's problem when he campaigned on a promise to build a wall along all 2,000 miles of the US-Mexican border and failed to deliver.

This is America's problem and, kudos to Lankford; he knows it's Congress' responsibility to fix it.

Congress has shirked that duty for decades. The last comprehensive attempt at immigration reform was in 1986 during the Reagan era, and we have watched every compromise since then get further out of reach.

Remember 2007? Two freshmen senators – Illinois Democrat Barack Obama and Florida Republican Mel Martinez – spent years brokering a compromise that would “bring the immigration debate toward the sensible center” through “pragmatic, comprehensive reform.” The effort crashed and burned under attacks from extremists on both the right and left.

It happened again in 2013, when the “Gang of Eight,” led by New York Democrat Charles Schumer and Florida Republican Marco Rubio, won Senate approval for a comprehensive plan to overhaul immigration. The group included South Carolina Republican Senator Lindsey Graham who declared “2013 is the year of immigration reform.”

The plan leaned into the Republican goal of more border security and the Democrat goal of enhancing pathways to citizenship. But in the Tea Party’s xenophobic frenzy of the moment, the House rejected it.

Then, Trump emerged in 2015 and everything got worse. He called illegal immigrants “criminal aliens,” and called for barring people based on their beliefs, ending birthright citizenship, enabling mass deportations, separating migrant children from their parents and, of course, building that wall.

His anti-American vision of immigration has now become the vision of the Republican Party. Border and immigration issues evoke visceral emotions, especially for Trump supporters whose migrant antagonism has become draped in the cloak of tribal identity.

For his part, Biden has been caught flat-footed. He failed to anticipate the effects of his policies. He campaigned on rejecting Trump’s ugly, inhumane rhetoric and promised to “end Trump’s assault on the dignity of immigrant communities.”

On Inauguration Day, Biden endorsed a sweeping immigration package that mirrored many of the proposals the Senate passed in 2013. He surpassed Trump’s four-year total of executive actions on immigration – more than 500, according to a recent tally by the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute. He sent the humane message that if you’ve been persecuted in your home country and you come to the border, we will allow you to make your case. And he coupled it with efforts to crack down on illegal crossings and provide new avenues for those who arrive by air with sponsors.

But, Lankford and others argue, Biden's policies were perceived as an invitation. Biden's use of humanitarian parole, for example, has allowed millions of migrants who claim asylum into the US until their cases were heard – which can take years because of the antiquated and broken asylum processing system.

As the policies pulled migrants north, an already overextended immigration system provided no push to keep out those genuinely not eligible for asylum. The result has been an explosion in border crossings, from every persecuted country on the globe, according to the Department of Homeland Security. In the last month, there have been some days with as many 12,000 people arriving.

As the crisis has heightened, Biden has also openly offered to compromise on policies Democrats previously rejected. He said he would shut down the border if given the authority. But with authority comes the need for enforcement, and that costs money. Since October, the administration has requested supplemental funding of about \$14 billion to add more border agents, immigration judges and deportation officers. It has gotten nowhere.

American voters need to acknowledge their role here, too.

We keep reelecting senators and members of Congress who have rejected attempts at compromise and enabled gridlock. Like Trump and the misguided splinter group of Oklahoma Republicans, mutual animosity and inherent distrust of the other side has poisoned progress. The operating principle of our legislative system is imperiled.

As Lankford tried to negotiate with a group of Democrats led by Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, another group of Senate Democrats vocally opposed the direction the talks were taking. Meanwhile, a group of Senate Republicans aligned with a conservative faction of House Republicans told Lankford they would not support any border security changes short of the restrictive “Secure the Border Act” known as H.R.2.

Disagreement is healthy, but not if it leads to intransigence. Democrats have to get past the delusion that everything Trump did on immigration was evil. Republicans need to get past the delusion that their economy can run without hard-working migrant labor.

Unlike Trump, Lankford wisely knows that progress has to come in small bites.

“We can work on these things because some of the things just aren’t partisan – dealing with immigration and border security,” he told Politico’s Ryan Lizza in December. “But until you get some sort of control over what’s happening at the border, when it’s this chaotic, you realize we’re not going to do anything because the problem is so big.”

There now appear to be more Democrats, including Biden, who are ready to accept compromise than there are Republicans. If we reject progress on border security this time and the chaos continues, we can rightly put the blame on Trump and the obstinate holdouts in his party.

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