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JURISPRUDENCE

Trump's Deportation Warehouse System Already Matches a Very Specific Period in History

BY DAHLIA LITHWICK

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chilling picture of what the Trump administration is building. Pitzer is the author of several books, including [One Long Night: A Global History of Concentration Camps](#), and her most recent newsletter post is "[Building the Camps: The Warehouseification of Detention and Initial Thoughts on Stopping It.](#)" The following conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Dahlia Lithwick: What is being built? At what speed is it being built? At what cost is it being built? How is it that we're at the place where the language that you use in your post, *concentration camps*, actually is not just apt but has become fairly obvious?

[Faded text, likely a quote from Andrew Pitzer]

[Faded text, likely a quote from Dahlia Lithwick]

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We are at the end of the first year of this second Trump administration. And even when you look at 1933 to 1945, around when it had started, Germany was putting a lot more people into camps, and yet we have more people in immigration detention today than that Germany did seven years into the Third Reich, which I think is just astounding when you think about it.

Even before he was elected, Trump was talking about this mass deportation campaign, that there were up to 20 million people in the United States illegally. Historians debate how many people moved through the Soviet gulag, whether it was 10 million or 20 million people in more than two decades who went through that system. What the Trump administration is talking about are those numbers in a four-year period. If you know anything about how terrible the Soviet gulag was, you'll recall that it transformed the country for generations that followed, and it wrecked lives.

The Soviets didn't know in advance what they were doing, but Stephen Miller has that context. That is something his people in the administration are openly embracing. We are already seeing conditions in these camps that rival early Nazi concentration camps, with [beatings, rapes, and reports of limited access to medical care](#). We've had a [writing in Latvia](#). [East Germany that has been declared a genocide](#). People have already died.

This is not something this administration discusses with advisors, right? This was the plan. [Last April, writing ICE Director Todd Lynum](#) was heard to say that what he really

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system and being used within and outside of it. It was this whole system that was very subtle, but it was incredibly complex and organized. Of course, that went to hell once the war started, but this warehouse situation of people was exactly the initial first goal. The administration of people through that warehouse system became the later explicit goal.

In terms of what our government is doing, I want to make clear. This can happen in a country only when things have been deeply wrong for a number of years in a number of ways. What we've already seen in the U.S., with prisons, with decades of dehumanizing immigrants, with the already existing nature of our punitive immigration system, where detention is literally used as a deterrent and to do harm to people — all that gives Trump these initial tools that they are clearly planning to expand on in tremendous ways.

People are asking us to what's happening on the ground, which is amazing and offers all kinds of potential for things to do. But I don't think people understand the scope of it. If they end up with all these warehouses, what automatically follows from that is you have transit camps and you have hold camps and you have whole communities whose identities become bound up with these warehouses. This is why we see some of these small towns and cities already working to resist the immigration and Customs Enforcement warehouses. That's in the name of the town. Just think, for how many places in our country is that what is going to be asked by their names going forward?

According to the plans that we see from Miller and Trump, this will be as large as — and potentially even larger than — the U.S. prison system, which is already as much larger than almost anything else in the world. It will exist almost entirely outside the realm of oversight of accountability. Concentration camps systems are always on and run around the existing legal system in a country at a given time. This isn't just going to be criminal detentions, there

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Republicans have found the best history of Trump's effort to build mass immigrant detention centers.

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Americans are waking up to the reality of identifying detainees from Camp East Mountain, located near El Paso, Texas: reports of hunger, of violence, of sexual assault, of death. Who is accountable for that?

I think everybody involved has to run the risk of accountability. The sooner we can shut down the largest wave of this as it's growing, the smaller that number will be. And it is better not only that we have justice for people even on the other side of this, the fewer people who will have to be held accountable in some way, the better it is for society. So even for the perpetrators, it is better if we can shut this down, but especially for the people that would have harm done to them.

It may be hard to imagine accountability in this moment, when so many systems are collapsing, but I think of the people I talked to in Argentina who had been tortured and held in some cases, they had been sexually assaulted, their friends killed. There was never a trial and where the military made itself accountable there. The dehumanizing ended, but there was never this moment of accountability. That came years later. One woman interviewed remembered that while she was imprisoned, she was able to peek under her blanket and see a tin pattern on the floor. When it came time to testify, they testified to everything that they could remember. Somebody went and found that tin pattern, and they found the floor, they found the house she had been held in, and they talked to the neighbors, and the neighbors recalled hearing the screams. They were able to work their way through these

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...and we need to make sure that if you're focused on them, the correct response to that is not further training for the guards. So we can talk about further training, and we can talk about standards, but that ultimately is not going to be what addresses this. Everybody needs to have accountability.

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