

IDEAS U.S.

How the U.S. Exports Punishment

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A woman holds a sign reading "Who Will Be Disappeared Next" as protestors gather outside the Permanent Mission of El Salvador to the United Nations in New York on June 5, 2025 to read the names of detainees at CECOT, El Salvador's maximum-security prison. *Kena Betancur— AFP/ Getty Images*

by [Abigail Glasgow](#)

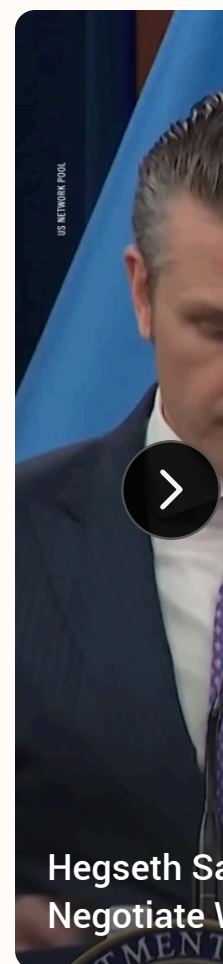
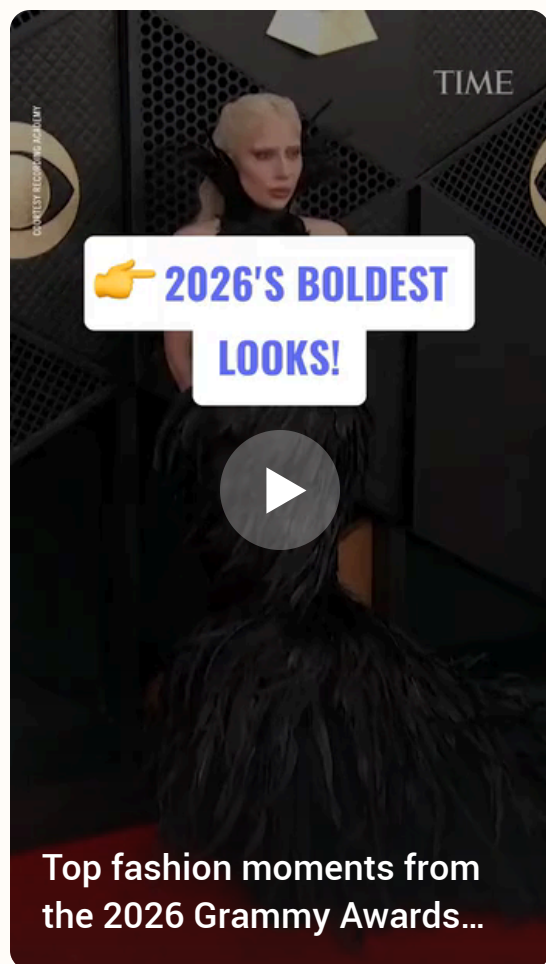
Glasgow is a Brooklyn-based writer and abolitionist primarily covering the intersection of the criminal legal system and culture

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In March 2025, the Trump administration rounded up over 250 United States immigrants, mainly Venezuelans, and trafficked them to El Salvador's mega-prison, Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo (CECOT). It was a violent move—made even more destructive by the fact that, just four months after the U.S.'s actions, Ecuadorian and Peruvian officials have, too, announced that they are keen to use this deal as a blueprint for detainees in their respective countries. The U.S. has currently invested 6 million dollars into CECOT, where they are keeping people in cells that confine 65 to 70 bodies at a time. (This week, the U.S. Supreme Court gave the Trump administration the green light to continue forcibly disappearing migrants to third countries without additional due process.)

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The U.S.'s contract with CECOT is, in and of itself, unparalleled (and a blatant violation of human rights and dignity). But it reveals a pattern that is certainly not new. The U.S. has a

detailed track record of exporting and influencing punishment tactics globally.

What we see today in El Salvador is not an exception, but instead the product of precedent since America's inception.

The U.S. provided running water for its first penitentiary before the White House; the infrastructure of punishment has always taken priority over that of democracy. Opened in 1829, Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP) emphasized control and surveillance through its panopticon design, which optimized the ability for a small staff of correctional officers to supervise a large group of incarcerated people. "It was considered a modern marvel," shares Baz Dreisinger, the scholar, author, and Executive Director of Incarceration Nations Network. "There are over 350 prisons modeled after it around the world."

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Punishment in this country—the preoccupation with state-sanctioned violence as a means of safety—has never been solely a domestic affair.

In Dreisinger's book, *Incarceration Nations*, she details how, after the establishment of facilities like ESP, "nineteenth-century European scholars made prison tours a vital stop on their visits across the pond," from Fredrick William IV of Prussia, among the first tourists, to rulers and commissioners in France, Russia, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden. American prisons soon "weaved their way into the fabric of global culture," she says.

Well into the 20th century, U.S. prisons served as a channel for innovation around punishment. The U.S. continued to implement the concept of solitary living as "penance," most notably in segregated units like Alcatraz's "D-Block." But it wasn't until the 1960s that the U.S. built its first super-maximum (known as "supermax") security prison: minimal human contact and recreation, limited natural light, and few to zero educational or work opportunities are some of the defining characteristics of the psychological and physical cruelty that served as a blueprint for others.

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In 1963, the Federal Bureau of Prisons built its first supermax, USP Marion in Illinois, with a 23-hour-a-day isolation policy. As the influence of the supermax grew domestically—by 1999, there were 57 in 34 states—so too did the model infiltrate punitive aims abroad. Dreisinger cites Brazil's Penitenciária Federal de Catanduvas, built in 2007, as a "slice of the United States [supermax] plunked down on foreign shores." (Brazil is one of the highest ranking countries when it comes to incarceration rates). "The moment I laid eyes on it," Dreisinger shares, "I almost forgot what country I was in." The scholar goes on to share that these supermax iterations exist in other countries as well, like how New Zealand's Auckland Prison directly cites USP Marion in its planning documents and the American Correctional Association (ACA) touts its publication "Supermax Prisons: Beyond the Rock," as a central resource guide for corrections overseas.

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In addition to these instances of the U.S. modeling what's possible for carceral practices, the country has also directly invested in broader approaches to criminalization internationally. "Cops have become frontline U.S. diplomats," explains Stuart Schrader, a scholar of race and policing, and the author of *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing*. "Cop diplomacy fosters cop friendship."

In El Salvador, for instance, one of the six International Law Enforcement Academies (ILEAs) sits as a current policing export. Ten minutes away lies the International Tactical Training Association, founded by a Chicago officer "after the State Department cut off government assistance to a specialized Salvadoran police unit linked to death squads," Schrader says.

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As for incarceration infrastructure and "success" abroad, the U.S. exported both the concept of privatization of prisons as well as the accreditation process led by the ACA. There was little resistance to expanding profit-driven privatization on a global scale. As for ACA accreditation, it "legitimizes" facilities and often justifies requests for additional funding. As ACA accreditation exists abroad, it's consequently plausible that this would increase the likelihood of those countries receiving funding.

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This process can be costly. The Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs awarded a \$3.6 million contract to the ACA for Mexico. (Since the initial award, the value of the contract has lowered to about \$2 million). A 2020 report by Senator Elizabeth Warren revealed that "accreditation has little to no correlation with detention facility conditions and practices" and is instead "a rubber-stamping of dangerous facilities." It also evidenced that ACA fees, paid by the institutions it audits, comprise nearly half of the association's revenue. These ACA certificates are strewn about prisons in Mexico, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Dubai, Colombia, and the UAE—evidence of just how vastly the U.S. has shaped carceral systems abroad. A 2020 report published by the agency boasts that "there is no doubt" they are "a global organization with work and influence that has stretched over the years to every major part of the world."

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The United States sets the bar for criminalization, often serving as a primary external source of financial support in many countries. This includes everything from the construction and remodeling of prisons and youth detention facilities to plea-bargaining reforms that incentivize bail and pre-trial detention. In 2022 alone, the United States sent \$34 million to Haiti, \$33 million to Mexico, \$28 million to Canada, and more in their efforts to fund criminal justice systems abroad. "The United States is invested in other countries having solid prison systems and police because we see it as preventing instability at our doorstep," Dreisinger says. But often these same systems perpetuate harm and the very instability the U.S. is purportedly trying to avoid. "We're exporting the problem, but we're not exporting thoughtful solutions—and we could be," Dreisinger adds.

It's important to remember that our current moment is not simply a reflection of authoritarian opportunism, but a consequence of years of legislation and financial investment into global prison systems. And yet administrations, past and present, consistently portray violence as isolated or individual—never systemic, never historical. But the centuries-long expansion in punitive tactics at home and abroad has brought us to our brutal present—and it's only going to metastasize further.

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