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OUR NATION OF IMMIGRANTS: ON THE BORDER

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HUDAK: There are about 2,000 miles of land border between the United States and Mexico. Somewhere between 900 and 1,200 miles of it is formed by the broad Rio Grande. Most of the border region is arid country, with many mountains and valleys that can be dangerous to travelers. In many areas, there's fencing, bollards, et cetera.

But the U.S.-Mexico border also features thriving cross-border communities, from Brownsville-Matamoros and El Paso-Juarez on the Texas border, to Nogales and Nogales on Arizona's border, to San Diego-Tijuana on California's coast. And also, the Tohono O'Odham Nation reservation in Arizona, which includes over 70 miles of the border.

For better or worse, the U.S.-Mexico border has become a symbol of the U.S. immigration system, and the border has become one of the most politicized images in the country today.

I'm John Hudak, senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. This is episode two of "Our Nation of Immigrants," a five-part series I'm hosting to explore the status of immigration policy in America.

In the first episode, I spoke with the child of immigrants and a demographer to understand both the personal side and the scale of immigration in America today. In upcoming episodes, I examine the economics of immigration, the questions of belonging, and policy solutions.

For this episode, I wanted to learn more about the connections—social and economic—that span communities along the U.S.-Mexico border, while also getting a better understanding of issues from and rhetoric about border towns, such as crime and jobs. I spoke with several current and former public officials who lived or worked in the region to better understand life on the U.S. southern border, including: Michael Chertoff, who served as Secretary of Homeland

Security under President George W. Bush from 2005 to 2009; Kevin Faulconer, the mayor of San Diego, which is the largest metropolitan area in the U.S.-Mexico border region; and Donald "Dee" Margo, who, since 2017, has served as the mayor of the city of El Paso. We'll use their experiences to better understand what it's like on the ground in communities where the United States and Mexico meet.

Let's begin in El Paso. Mayor Dee Margo has lived in El Paso for over 40 years, and prior to serving as mayor he represented parts of El Paso County in the Texas House of Representatives. When I spoke to Mayor Margo, he reflected on how immigration has affected his city and its historic relationship with Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which is just across the border.

MAYOR MARGO: There's no other place in North America or the Western Hemisphere like El Paso-Juárez. To start at the beginning, our history actually dates back 360 years to 1659 when the mission was founded in Juárez. And until 1848, the bulk of our population was on the south side of the Rio Grande. Fort Bliss came to El Paso in 1848 and population migration started north and the railroads came. But we have been one bi-national, bilingual, bi-cultural region for over 350 years—a hundred years before the United States was ever founded. So, there's no other place. You can stand on the top of one our office buildings and look south and you cannot tell the difference between where El Paso ends and Juárez begins.

We also have six of the 28 bridges that pass from Texas into Mexico. In 2018, I don't have the 2019 numbers, we had about a 100 billion dollars in trade. But on a daily basis on what comes north and what we count, we have 35,000 private passenger vehicles coming north. We have 22,000 pedestrians. We have the largest pedestrian crossing on the entire Mexican border. 22,000 pedestrians coming north every day—and when I say that, I want to say legally. And about 4,000 container trucks coming north from commerce from the *maquiladoras*, et cetera.

So, how does the border affect us? We are the border. We are there. There's family on both sides, culture both sides, commerce both sides. It's been that way for over 350 years.

HUDAK: These cities are connected by a lot more than their proximity. Mayor Margo also explained how he and the mayor of Juárez work together on public projects.

MARGO: We have a sister cities agreement with the mayor of Juárez—with the city of Juárez. And the mayor and I, he had been there since 2004, and I think it was a year and a half ago or almost two years ago—it had been pretty dormant. We re-energized it, recommitted to it, and had a public signing. And since that time, we've had two joint council meetings together. And my wife, as first lady, joins his wife, the first lady of Juárez, and they do tours in Juárez from El Paso. It's been going on for some time.

There's a lot of give and take from an aesthetic standpoint. We have taken what we call South El Paso Street, which is by one of their downtown bridges. We put up a monument that says "Bienvenidos" and done lights all the way down South El Paso street to welcome our neighbors from the south. They're doing the same thing on their side.

We just gave them two fire engines that we had not needed. I mean they didn't even have—I mean for a community that's three times our size, they have a police force the same size as our police force. So, that's one of the reasons that you have the constant issues related to public safety. But Juárez and Northern Mexico—it's a great community. We're very close. The state of Texas gives in-state tuition to Mexican nationals for college; has done it for years. We are one region. We're a region of 2.7 million people with an average age of 32.

HUDAK: You'll note how deeply Mayor Margo feels a connection between his city, El Paso, and Juárez, how close the communities are, and how important immigrants are to the identity of El Paso.

When we spoke—and this was in January at the annual U.S. Conference of Mayors meeting—he was wearing an “El Paso Strong” pin on his lapel. El Paso was the site of a racially motivated shooting carried out in August 2019 by an avowed white nationalist who drove several hundred miles to reach the city to commit heinous crimes. Nearly two dozen people were killed, and the city was thrust into a global spotlight overnight.

I asked the mayor what he made of his city’s response at the time and what that experience could tell outsiders—those of us who are not from El Paso—about the culture of his city.

MARGO: We're a unique community. I've said that before. I'm redundant, I'm repetitive, but there's nowhere else in the Western Hemisphere like us. I talked about the families on both sides. The question I would receive after the shooting by an evil white supremacist who came from 700 miles away, and as I've stated on numerous occasions, I do not believe that person would have ever come from our region. The media could not get over—well, first of all they'd ask me, "Were you surprised that there were 8 Mexican nationals at that Walmart?" No. That's the daily basis. That's the give and take on both sides. It's normal. It's normal for us.

Initially, there were 46 wounded and 22 perished. And sometimes, I think we lose sight of the fact that there were a lot of people that were injured there. We've come together as a community. I think it will take several years for us to fully heal, but I will tell you the outpouring was phenomenal. I went to virtually every funeral or visitation on the United States side that I could go to with my wife. I said, I don't want to go to anymore funerals.

The media, when they would come out, could not get over our culture and our hospitality and the response. We're just different, and you don't know it until you get there. You can't understand our location, our demographics, the fact that we have a mountain in the center of our

city. We're 4,000 feet above sea level. We're high desert. People just—they don't know it until they come out there. They have no real understanding of who we are. But what I've said is that incident on August the 3rd will not define us. It will be part of our history, but I want to make sure it's relegated to an asterisk footnote as a part of our history.

HUDAK: He went on to add more about how safe his city is historically.

MARGO: El Paso is one of the safest cities in the nation. It's been one of the safest cities for many years. It's either number one, number two, or number three. We only had, in 2018, 18 murders. That's all we had. In one fell swoop in one day we have 22. But it's so, so foreign to us. That's why we're a safe city, a generous city, a city that is friendly and welcoming. People from the northeast are shocked; they're fearful because we're too friendly. It's just amazing. That's who we are. That's what's special about us.

HUDAK: One part of the immigration policy debate in which political rhetoric fails to match reality involves crime. You might hear people who are hesitant about accepting more immigrants because they would "bring more crime." In fact, the president suggested this in his infamous campaign launch in 2015.

PRESIDENT TRUMP: They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crimes, they're rapists, and some, I assume, are good people.

HUDAK: That's Donald Trump announcing his candidacy for president of the United States in 2015. The speech kicked off a campaign that would have an emphasis on immigration, and lines like these were just flat out false.

For one, U.S. counties along the border have lower rates of crime than the rest of the country. For instance, in border counties, there are 3.4 homicides per 100,000 people, versus 5.2 homicides per 100,000 people in non-border counties. Immigrants are less likely than native-

born Americans to commit crimes, and places with high proportions of immigrants don't have a higher crime rate than those without. During the 1990s, when the immigration rate was especially high, crime fell nationwide by dramatic rates.

Mayor Margo has himself been vocal on this subject—even going so far as to correct the record in an op-ed for USA Today when President Trump said something false about immigration and crime in his 2019 State of the Union address. This happened in the middle of a major congressional fight over funding border wall construction and days before the president was scheduled to make an official visit to El Paso.

Here is the passage from that speech.

PRESIDENT TRUMP: The border city of El Paso, Texas, used to have extremely high rates of violent crime, one of the highest in the entire country and considered one of our nation's most dangerous cities. Now, immediately upon its building, with a powerful barrier in place, El Paso is one of the safest cities in our country. Simply put, walls work, and walls save lives.

HUDAK: I asked Mayor Margo about that experience and also what he wants Americans to understand about crime and public safety on the border.

MARGO: What began with the comments by the president came from the attorney general in Texas who stated, when the president was in McAllen, Texas, in January of last year, that if the president keeps focusing on his wall—we call it a fence—stated that the wall has, interpreted the nomenclature from the President, he said El Paso had a high crime rate prior to the wall going up and it was reduced significantly when the wall went up, which we call a fence. And to be candid, it was about 10 miles of replacement fencing for a chain-link fence that had porous holes in it. And that was done in '09. And that was part of the Bush administration's push.

Well, all I did was correct that information that was re-echoed by the president in the State of the Union a year ago to explain that that did not cause us to have a massive reduction in crime. It didn't hurt us, especially when there was vehicle theft that we covered when the fence went up stopped. The holes in the chain-link fence. But we didn't see a—from an immigration standpoint—the petty theft was border theft. I mean, it was residents from Mexico coming across and stealing vehicles like trucks, et cetera, driving them across back to Mexico. It was just larceny and the basics. But that didn't have an impact.

So, my push-back was not so much on the president as it was on the information he was given by our attorney general and correcting the record. And I will always correct it when it comes to El Paso.

We were mis-perceived when the drug violence and the cartels were fighting back and forth in '08 and '09 and during that time because everyone thought, well, with Juarez right there then there's got to be violence overflow. There wasn't. It was all contained in Juárez. And they're trying to do the best they can. I've told you the limitations they have on their police force, et cetera. But they're basically—people are going back over, going to meals, people go over there to entertainment districts, et cetera. So, all I did was correct the record formally, publicly, and to the president.

HUDAK: For more information on the perceived relationship between immigrants and crime, I reached out to Michael Chertoff, who served as secretary of Homeland Security from 2005 to 2009. Prior to serving as secretary, Mr. Chertoff was the head of the criminal division of the United States Department of Justice from 2001 to 2003 where he was one of the principal people responding to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent counterterrorism effort. He has

also been a U.S. Court of Appeals judge and now chairs the boards of the Chertoff Group and Freedom House and has plenty more affiliations.

The Department of Homeland Security was created after the terrorist attacks on September 11th—now 19 years ago— in order to safeguard the country against terrorism and to respond to future attacks.

DHS also houses many of the agencies and offices that implement U.S. immigration policy. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) oversees "applications and petitions for immigration and naturalization benefits"—including the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA program. And on the enforcement side, the Department includes both Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE). CBP "enforces immigration laws at and between the ports of entry." ICE is responsible for interior enforcement and for detention and removal operations.

I spoke with Secretary Chertoff remotely in August. I started by asking him about how tightly our border is controlled, the processes we use when we admit immigrants, and challenges the immigration enforcement system faces.

CHERTOFF: Well, first I would say that I've never seen any evidence that legal immigrants coming in commit crimes at any different rate than Americans born in the United States. In fact, I think probably they are less likely to be criminal. We do vet people when they come in. We have a pretty sophisticated system we put into place after September 11th to make sure dangerous people aren't coming in. And, of course, to qualify for a green card and citizenship, you also have to have a spotless record. And we do do some checking when we give people visas. So, while nothing is perfect, the idea that there's a risk with legal immigration is complete nonsense.

There's no question that we do want to have control over who comes in, who crosses our borders, and to the extent you have people who are coming in without authorization, that is something we have to enforce the laws against. Part of the problem is, though, there is a demand for people to come from other parts of the world to do work that, frankly, no Americans are prepared to do, or where people have special skills that actually add the American economy. And so, the question is, how do you get those people into the U.S. in such a way as to have it all be legal and above board and, at the same time, create a disincentive to try to sneak in and avoid legal obligations? The real answer is very simple. If we have a relatively flexible and well-run system for bringing people in legally to work, many people will be much less likely to want to sneak in illegally. And then we can focus our enforcement resources on that smaller number of people that may be coming in for a nefarious reason.

HUDAK: Now, this episode is focused on the United States' southern border. As I've said previously, the border, the wall, Mexico—these are all often inaccurately held up as symbols for the entire U.S. immigration system. In my interview with Sec. Chertoff, I asked if he felt there was an overemphasis on the southern border when discussing immigration.

CHERTOFF: Well, I think from the public standpoint, people do tend to see the media focus mainly on the Mexico border. And certainly, in terms of people crossing between ports of entry, that's much more likely to come from Mexico than from Canada. But you're quite right. If you look, for example, at overstays—people who are in the country that came legally but don't leave—that is a fair proportion of the population of unauthorized foreigners who are living in the United States. It's not just people sneaking across between the border. And it's also important to focus on who comes through the ports of entry. And are they, in fact, likely to overstay, or do

they pose another danger? And that's what a lot of our emphasis on DHS was to prevent another 9/11 with hijackers coming in from overseas.

By the way, an interesting misconception is I remember when I was in office and even today, I read people suggest, “oh, the Mexico border is so open that that's where we're going to get terrorists coming in through Mexico.” But actually, the only cases that I'm aware of in which terrorists crossed the land border, they came from Canada, not from Mexico. So, there is a lot of misunderstanding and misconception that is prevalent in the public view of this issue.

HUDAK: Secretary Chertoff headed DHS when the Department was young. After all, he was only the second Senate confirmed DHS secretary. He followed Tom Ridge, also appointed by President George W. Bush, and was succeeded by Janet Napolitano who was appointed by President Barack Obama. Since then, there have been three more Senate-confirmed secretaries: Jeh Johnson under President Obama, and John Kelly and Kirstjen Nielsen under President Trump.

Many of the questions I had for him were about the health of the department—what it’s getting right or wrong, and how it can improve. The first question I had about the Department addressed the changes implemented by his successors and his confidence in the ability of our immigration enforcement system to get the job done both when he left his position and today.

CHERTOFF: Well, I think we built a system that had strong barriers against dangerous people coming in that used sophisticated intelligence analytics to see whether there were people that we needed to take a close look at before they were admitted. And my successors under President Obama, I think, continued that approach. Now, there were always fluctuations up and down in the flow of illegal migration, partly because that's driven by extrinsic factors. For example, when there's an increase in violence and disorder in Central and South America, that

drives more people to flee and that does create pressure at the border. So, there were ups and downs, but I think in the main the approach taken was to continue with a robust system of checking people and have a reasonable but not unduly harsh enforcement mechanism.

I think what we've seen recently is, in addition to an emphasis on building walls, which really are very poor tools for enforcement of our border security, is a kind of a harshness and antagonism to even legal migration, which I think is counterproductive for the country.

HUDAK: This growing antagonism between people and the government is an important point because it can have serious implications for effective governance and society. I asked Secretary Chertoff what he believes some of those negative effects are.

CHERTOFF: For one thing, it creates a cruel situation where you are seeing this issue of children being separated from parents in custody or unaccompanied minors essentially getting lost. And that creates a human tragedy for them as well. It also creates division and dissension within the United States because it's easy to move from hostility to migration to ethnic prejudice and racial prejudice.

But I do have to say, this is not just an American phenomenon. We have seen around the world, and particularly in Europe in the last five years, the rise of a xenophobic and arguably to some extent racist set of ideologies that seek to view migrants and foreigners as the enemy for political reasons. And that is not only bad in terms of the way we deal with migrants, but it creates a kind of a poisonous atmosphere in our own countries that can lead to some very unpleasant political behavior.

HUDAK: DHS has been particularly scrutinized for separating families, holding children in cages, and using other enforcement practices most people would find cruel.

PBS NEWSHOUR: The Associated Press detailed conditions inside a Customs and Border Patrol detention center in Clint, Texas, where allegedly 250 infants, children and teenagers are being held. According to the AP, there are not adequate food, shelter, or sanitation inside.

HUDAK: Now, while a whole lot of immigration reform policies will need to be passed by Congress—which presents a set of challenges which we'll discuss later—there is room for reform within the department itself and opportunities to move the agency in a different direction. I asked Secretary Chertoff what he would do if he were back in his position today that would unilaterally improve policy and the manner in which the department is run.

CHERTOFF: Look, what I would do is, I think, to an extent you do sometimes need to hold people. You need to assess who needs to be held pending a proceeding or a court hearing, who can be released on some kind of detention or bail, and to try to organize it in a way to be as least restrictive as possible without sacrificing—you need to make sure people do show up for their hearings and to obey the law. And then to the extent there are people that need to be held, you want to have humane family detention facilities or other facilities that are not going to be unnecessarily crowded, where people get reasonable food and medical care. Those are things that can be done administratively.

I also think you want to deploy your resources in those areas where there is the most pressure in terms of illegal crossing. And it should be done on a strategic basis. And I would not be spending money on walls. I'd be focused on technology, which is a much more efficient way to patrol the borders.

HUDAK: We also spoke about creating immigration enforcement systems that were more humane, more logical, more effective, and more functional. Secretary Chertoff added this.

CHERTOFF: Immigration reform, even a down payment on that, would be a big step forward. If you put aside the issue of when can people be eligible to be citizens, and you just create a temporary worker program, that would take a lot of pressure off the border. It would also mean we wouldn't be overwhelming facilities where people are being held with too many people. Now, of course, with the virus, there's even more compelling reasons not to be holding people in detention. And it would take a lot of the pressure off.

It would also be good to have a humane and efficient asylum policy. As a country, we are committed, like many countries in the world, to treating refugees in a way that gives them protection against being persecuted or even killed. And when we create unnecessary roadblocks, not only are we betraying our obligation, but we're sending a very bad message to the rest of the world that we don't really care if they torture or kill people because it's inconvenient for us to give asylum.

Now, I think what should happen is all countries ought to share the burden of refugees. And I think this was a problem in Europe. There was a little bit of a sense that some countries were taking a disproportionate share of refugees, which does have a certain economic and social burden, and other countries were shunning their obligations. So some equity in this is an important element of a policy.

HUDAK: During the Bush administration, there was a lot of work on comprehensive immigration reform policies, which Chertoff shepherded. More negotiations took place during the Obama administration, and while we have seen small, piecemeal reforms pass to address specific problems, comprehensive immigration reform hasn't been achieved.

Now, there are certainly political headwinds, which is an issue we'll get into in another episode, but as Secretary Chertoff and I spoke, he pointed to more reasons why comprehensive reform just makes sense.

CHERTOFF: The logic of comprehensive immigration reform is something that both parties have recognized and pursued. And part of it is, we do have a need for people to come and do temporary work. And also, we have people who have tremendous skills who are migrants who we should encourage to come and build businesses here. And at the same time, the best way to reduce the flow of illegal entry is to give people who want to come to work a legal way to do so. And that would actually take pressure off enforcement.

So this is very logical, and I used to say to people who would say, well, migrants are going to take American jobs. I would say, really? How many kids do you know graduate from school and say I want to pick lettuce or tomatoes in the fields of California? The truth is, if we didn't have migrant labor working there, we would wind up not having tomatoes and lettuce growing in California. It would all be grown in Mexico and would be imported.

So, logic and common sense, as well as being humane, all counsel for comprehensive reform. The problem is it's easy to demagogue the issue on both sides. So when we were trying to get immigration reform, the people who were hardliners against migration talked about how we're going to get swamped with people from another culture and they're going to take over the country. On the other side, there were people who wanted to have basically open borders and have everybody become a citizen as soon as they want, which is not fair to people who have a stake in the country, who have contributed to it, and who want to feel that the people who are here are committed to American values—they're not just here as a matter of convenience.

So I think the extremes were very good at amplifying their voices. Frankly, I found talk radio was a big tool for doing that. And that's one of the reasons we couldn't mobilize enough momentum in Congress to get it done.

HUDAK: I want to return to my conversation with El Paso Mayor Dee Margo who has told us a lot about the close connection between his city and Juárez. And the last point I want to make here is that the connection extends far beyond formal directives from the mayors' offices and cooperation on public safety.

The economic ties between El Paso and Juárez are inseparable. You heard earlier from Mayor Margo that there are billions of dollars in trade annually between El Paso and Mexico. And Mexican nationals crossing the border every day to work in Texas are major drivers of El Paso's economy.

MARGO: Well, let me talk about what Mexico does for our city to begin with, the *maquilas* in Juárez. I mean, we have something like, I can't remember, 70 some odd companies of the Fortune 500 are located. Manufacturing from medical supplies to automotive products. I don't think you can assemble a vehicle in the United States without the products coming from Juárez. I mean lock assembly, steering wheel, all kinds of component parts for that. For every four jobs in Juárez there's one job in El Paso. Over 50,000 of our population, of our work force, is tied to the *maquiladora* program in Mexico.

On the other side, they come over and, yes, they're employed in El Paso. They're also students at the University of Texas, El Paso, or it could be Texas Tech Medical School, or could be New Mexico State, but we don't have a good feel for the numbers there.

I monitor our sales tax revenues from a commerce standpoint to see what are they doing in the way of purchasing. And I was very concerned last year with the border issues and the fact

that the delays on the bridges would hamper and cause people not to want to come across and shop in El Paso, which does go on. But we don't know exactly where it stands but our sales tax revenues were actually up last year. I was shocked, frankly, because I thought there would be a down-size. We don't know exactly what part of the Mexican consumer purchasing is in our city. We don't know that for sure, but it is a, it is a major portion.

HUDAK: All along the U.S.-Mexico border, cities collaborate significantly and create powerful bonds. Cities on both sides of the border depend on each other. The success of one means the success of the other. That's the true relationship between El Paso and Juárez, but that relationship isn't unique. Another great example of that type of relationship is 700 miles to the west where San Diego, California, and Tijuana, Mexico, straddle the international border.

The border crossing in the San Ysidro section in San Diego is the busiest land port of entry in Western Hemisphere. By truck alone, over 65 billion dollars' worth of cross-border trade was conducted in California in 2019, and California's exports to Mexico that year were worth 27.8 billion dollars. Earlier this year, I spoke by phone with San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer about the effect immigration has on his city and San Diego's close relationship with Tijuana.

FAULCONER: We talk about the relationship between San Diego and Tijuana, and indeed all of Northern Baja California, it's one region that really works well together. I think a couple of numbers are important. Trade between Mexico and the United States moving through San Diego totals 60 billion dollars each year. We have one of the world's strongest cross-border manufacturing supply chains with sometimes trucks that will cross back and forth multiple times before they're finished. And really, I think we are known as a region that really collaborates—works across all industries from economic development to tourism. Even our libraries and firefighters work together.

And we have multiple programs on both sides of the border. It's a very dynamic border. We have approximately a hundred thousand people that will cross the border each day. And again, it is a region that works very, very well together.

In the area of medical device manufacturing—If you take what we're doing in San Diego and match it with Tijuana, we are the largest region of medical device manufacturing on the planet. And so chances are if you have some type of device, whether it's a pacemaker, you name it, it was created in this region. So that is, I think, an important example but a real one of what our two cities really mean to each other.

HUDAK: I asked Mayor Faulconer a similar question that I asked Mayor Margo: For those of us who don't live on the border, what sets communities like San Diego apart?

FAULCONER: We have a border structure, and our cities are right next to one another. But we breathe the same air. We share the same environment. We have families that live and work together on both sides. I think many would be surprised to see that we have businesses, shopping centers, and homes right next to the border. We really focus on that cross-border cooperation and communication. We are the largest land port of entry in North America. And the capital investment that we are doing to make travel and processed goods easier—We just opened up two years ago our cross-border express, which is our link to the Tijuana airport. That's sort of a record 2.8 million passengers in 2019 alone. We just finalized our land port of entry expansion project. Because like I said, it's a very busy border. We have 70,000 northbound vehicles processed each and every day.

So it's an economic engine. It's a cultural engine. That cross-border relationship is a strength of ours. It's a competitive advantage for our region and one that we work very, very hard to continue to grow.

HUDAK: I asked the mayor if firmly closing the border between San Diego and Tijuana would have devastating effects on the economic and cultural relationship the two cities have.

FAULCONER: Yeah, it would. And again, why we worked so closely on a border that works, has all the security precautions that we need, but also a border that encourages that cross-border trade and commerce. It's incredibly important. And so that is, again, while we are working on a new port of entry and Otay Mesa, what we've done on the cross-border express from the airport, it's all about ensuring that the border works because it is such an important economic engine.

HUDAK: And what Mayor Faulconer had to say on crime and public safety in his city only reinforced what we heard from El Paso Mayor Margo and Secretary Chertoff.

FAULCONER: We are the largest land port of entry in North America and we are one of the safest big cities in America. That is something we're very proud of. We consistently rank as one of the safest cities in the country by every benchmark. And our public safety policies really have continued to work. As I said, we have a very strong relationship and we built that between our two cities.

Just to give you an example: our police officers and firefighters are in constant communication with one another. We just had some cross-training exercise with our firefighters just last month. We have public safety collaboration, and it's incredibly important to really foster that relationship. It doesn't happen by accident. It works through thoughtful planning, thoughtful communication, and again, it's why we're one of the safest big cities in the country.

HUDAK: That cross-border collaboration goes beyond police, firefighters, and other elements of public safety. In fact, the mayor told me that at the time of our interview—before the coronavirus crisis—one of the region’s biggest priorities was improving infrastructure on both

sides of the border in the Tijuana River Valley to prevent cross-border sewage flows. “When we talk with one voice,” he told me, “myself and the Tijuana mayor, we have a better opportunity for success.”

Those are some of the important and necessary ways that cities on the U.S.-Mexico border collaborate every day. Those efforts almost never make national headlines but are critical to ensure the region and its people thrive.

FAULCONER: I'll tell you, when I was elected over six years ago, the very first week on the job I traveled right next door to Tijuana, met with the mayor, and through different administrations we've had extremely close collaboration. Look, I feel so strongly about that. We have a memorandum of understanding. And so not only is that a strong relationship between our cities, but with the mayor and our department heads meet every other month. Our key department heads on how are we collaborating, how are we sharing information, and how are we doing cultural exchanges, which, as I said before, is so incredibly important. Public safety is in communication constantly. So, I have found it's very important not just to have the mayors work together, but really, how are we ensuring that our chambers of commerce, our delegation visits. So it is a it is a constant effort. It's not something that just happens every now and again.

HUDAK: Mayor Faulconer also discussed how the border mayors—for nearly a decade—have formally organized into the U.S.-Mexico Border Mayors Association. According to the association’s website, it “is dedicated to making the united voice of our communities heard in state and national capitals and to improving the lives of the more than 14 million residents who make our region a globally competitive economic engine for North America.” This organization brings counterparts in border cities together annually to collaborate and coordinate on a variety of areas of policy.

FAULCONER: Everybody who's a who's a mayor on the border understands how important our relationship with Mexico is. And as mayor, I restarted our cross-border Mayors Alliance. It's one that's not just here in California, but across all border states. We've really reignited the Border Mayors Alliance. And the reason that's important is because we have a story of success to tell as mayors. And if we're not telling that story, nobody's going to tell it for us. So whether we're advocating in Washington, D.C., or Mexico City, I think it's incredibly important.

HUDAK: One thing that impressed me is a program San Diego established to welcome new immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. "Welcoming San Diego" is the name of the program, and it comes equipped with twenty actionable recommendations for the community that focus on five key areas: economic opportunity, education, inclusive access, civic engagement, and safe communities. The program, according to its website, "envision[s] a vibrant, inclusive and resilient region that attracts families and businesses from around the world and where all San Diegans can flourish." I spoke with Mayor Faulconer about the program and the motivating factors for putting it together.

FAULCONER: Our Welcoming San Diego strategic plan really is the blueprint for the city and the region to promote immigrant integration and to also create policies that will better welcome immigrants and refugees into our city. It's a set of recommendations that came straight from our immigrant and refugee communities. And really, I think it covers five topic areas, including economic opportunity. So how do we promote financial literacy among new San Diegans? And supporting immigrant and refugee owned businesses?

Second, a focus on education in terms of professional development, really how we're deepening partnerships between school districts and an imminent immigrant community organizations.

Third, really focus on access. So how are we expanding language access and ensuring services are user friendly, culturally responsive?

And then the last two: civic engagement. Really, how do we get people involved in civic government here in San Diego? And then I think lastly, ensuring that we have safe and connected communities, and that we foster trust and communication between our public safety departments and our immigrant residents.

HUDAK: I asked Mayor Faulconer whether he feels the program has been successful.

FAULCONER: You know, I think it's going very, very well. I felt strongly about this; the fact that we devoted a new position to it here, and not only for the city of San Diego but for the entire region. It's working. We work with our community partners to find ways that we collaborate to implement all the recommendations that we have in our Welcoming San Diego plan.

HUDAK: One of the positions created is the immigrant affairs manager for the city. I asked the mayor to expand a little on what that role entails.

FAULCONER: We acted purposely and intentionally. And to have that position, I think shows the importance of it, and it's an area where we're growing. Look, immigrants from around the globe help define who we are in San Diego. In fact, we have nearly 800,000 individuals throughout our region. One in four San Diego County residents is an immigrant. They share their culture, their heritage, they create new business, and they give back to our community. And so, having this new role helps to harness that, helps to ensure that future growth is connected to our ability to welcome new Americans to the region. It's part of, as I said, making sure that the foundations are in place so these new Americans can be successful.

HUDAK: And we'll leave my conversation with Mayor Faulconer on an important note, discussing what we should already know: that immigrants to his city want to be involved in their communities, and how this program can help them make those connections easier.

FAULCONER: I think what we found, and not surprisingly so, there was a real hunger for help and for information. These new immigrants, these new Americans, want to get involved. They want to help start businesses. They want to create businesses that they may have had where they came from. And so this initiative, in helping to hire somebody to over oversee it and listen to the community, is something that I've been—I'm not surprised because we knew there was a hunger out there, but it's been so beneficial to see how important it is and how many individuals want to take advantage of the resources and the referrals that put it all together in one place at work. Word travels quickly. And so, I think this is an area where we're going to continue to grow and to expand. It's about opportunity, economic opportunity, and really, helping people to be part of the American dream.

HUDAK: I think this is a good place to end this episode, talking about why it's important we welcome immigrants and help them feel like they both belong and are a valued part of their new communities. When people discuss immigration, they often do so from a distance, and that can cause some real challenges. For starters, it's easy to make assumptions about the border if you've never been there before. I hope Mayors Faulconer and Margo have helped provide just a taste of what life and communities are like in each of their great cities.

It might also be easy to believe immigrants lead to a large increase in crime if you hear it repeated on television or see anecdotes blown up with malicious intent. However, research tells us that's not true. Secretary Michael Chertoff's words about the importance of an immigration system that incorporates humanity into enforcement ring particularly true in today's

environment. He noted that while the immigration system in the United States serves an important role, it is badly in need of reform, and politicization and misinformation has often put those reforms out of reach and harms people in the process.

And it's also easy to discuss public policy in a way that distances oneself from the consequences of a policy for people—and the immigration system affects a lot of people in serious, life-altering ways.

Now, let's go out listening to Michael Chertoff, former secretary of Homeland Security, and his reflections on what U.S. immigration stands for.

CHERTOFF: I think I only want to say this, and I do want to remind people about this, when you talk about the issue of migration. As I said earlier, almost everybody is a descendant of a migrant. And many of the people who came in past generations were fleeing other parts of the world where they were being oppressed. And to be honest, a lot of times they got racist or ethnically-prejudiced responses from people in the U.S. But we didn't, for the most part, historically, shut the door. And that's why most of us living here are able to do so.

If some of our ancestors had faced the barriers that people want to put up now, if those had been barriers then, many of us wouldn't be here and God knows where we would be. So, have a little bit of humility and gratitude and remember the importance of migration to the fabric of this country.

In many parts of the world, whether you are a full citizen depends upon your appearance or your family name. What I always used to tell people when we did swearing in ceremonies—including, by the way, swearing in ceremonies I did in military bases in Iraq and in Afghanistan for green card holders who were fighting for the country and had finally qualified to become citizens—I said the great thing about this country is when you become a citizen, whether you're

born here or you're naturalized, you're as much a stakeholder in this country as someone whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower. That is the beauty of this country and it's something we must not forget.

HUDAK: This has been Our Nation of Immigrants. A lot of people contributed to the episodes in this special series of the Brookings Cafeteria Podcast. First, I want to thank my guests who took time to let me interview them for this episode: Secretary Michael Chertoff, San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer, and El Paso Mayor Dee Margo.

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I’m John Hudak.