

# The Brick and the Border

*Blowback, Intervention, and the Politics of Migration*

August 2026

On November 26, 2025, two members of the West Virginia National Guard were shot near the White House. Specialist Sarah Beckstrom died the next day. Staff Sergeant Andrew Wolfe was seriously injured and survived. The man accused of the attack, Rahmanullah Lakanwal, was an Afghan national who had previously worked with a CIA-backed partner force in Kandahar. The criminal case remained pending when this essay was revised, and the allegations are not findings of guilt.<sup>1</sup>

The government responded almost immediately. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services paused adjudication of Afghan immigration requests and announced additional security reviews.<sup>2</sup> The instinct was easy to understand: when violence reaches the front door, tighten the door. A border is visible. An application can be frozen. A distant war, a dissolved militia, a classified partnership, and the long afterlife of an evacuation are much harder to fit inside one announcement.

Still, one fact in the accused man's biography did not fit neatly inside the border response. Before he entered the United States, he had reportedly served in a force built, trained, and supported as an instrument of American policy. That fact does not excuse the alleged crime. Explanation is not exculpation. Political context cannot dissolve individual responsibility. But it does expose a familiar habit: we treat the person who reaches our border as the beginning of the story.

What I am trying to recover is the part of the story we usually cut off. American intervention is rarely the sole cause of another country's collapse, violence, or migration. Local rulers make choices. Domestic institutions fail. Neighboring states intervene. Citizens possess agency, including the agency to resist, collaborate, flee, or harm. Yet American power can change the probability, scale, and direction of what follows. When those consequences later reach the United States, our policy debates routinely amputate the upstream history.

The word blowback can make this sound mystical, as though history were collecting a debt. I mean something plainer: an unintended consequence of policy that returns to affect the state that helped set it in motion. It is causality operating across institutions and decades. The example I keep returning to is blunt. I throw the brick. You knock over the vase. Next time, I tell you to be polite. You remain responsible for the vase, but I do not get to pretend the brick never crossed the room. Causation is not absolution. Individual guilt is not an eraser either.

That does not mean every later crisis can be traced to one clean American decision. History almost never offers a chain that convenient. The better questions are narrower: Which actors did a policy strengthen? Which institutions did it weaken? What incentives did it create? What happened when the patron withdrew? Which costs were displaced onto civilians, neighboring countries, or future administrations? A claim of blowback becomes serious only when it can name a mechanism.

The two easiest stories are also the least useful. One makes the United States omnipotent: every foreign failure becomes an American production, and people abroad become props without agency. The other makes the United States weightless: weapons, sanctions, coups, partner forces, and security guarantees somehow leave no durable imprint once an operation ends. Both are fantasies. Power is neither total nor consequence-free.

Afghanistan is the clearest place to test that claim because the popular version is so tempting: the United States armed the mujahideen, the mujahideen became the Taliban, and the Taliban sheltered al-Qaeda. The slogan points toward a real history and then ruins it by collapsing distinct actors and periods into one line.

The Afghan revolt against the communist government was already underway before the Soviet invasion. On July 3, 1979, President Jimmy Carter authorized a modest covert program of cash, propaganda, medical supplies, and other nonmilitary support for insurgents. After Soviet forces invaded in December, Carter approved lethal aid. The program then expanded dramatically under the Reagan administration, with Pakistan's intelligence service acting as the principal conduit and Saudi Arabia providing substantial parallel support.<sup>3</sup> The United States did not invent Afghan resistance, cause the Soviet invasion, or precisely control every group that received support. It did help turn a local insurgency into a heavily resourced international proxy war.

That transformation mattered. External funding privileged armed organizations over civilian institutions. Pakistan's role gave its security establishment enormous influence over which factions received weapons and legitimacy. Refugee camps, religious schools, intelligence services, foreign volunteers, and weapons pipelines formed a regional war ecology that outlived the Soviet withdrawal. The battlefield was not merely supplied; it was institutionally reorganized.

The Taliban emerged around 1994, after the Soviet withdrawal and amid a brutal civil war among former resistance factions. It was predominantly Pashtun and drew heavily from religious students and fighters shaped by the war and refugee experience. It was not simply the old mujahideen under a new name, nor was it a puppet assembled in Washington.<sup>4</sup> Yet its rise is difficult to understand without the militarized political landscape that the anti-Soviet war helped create and that outside patrons, including the United States, helped sustain.

That is less satisfying than saying America created the Taliban, but it is truer. The United States helped finance a system in which armed intermediaries became the dominant political technology, then largely lost interest when the immediate objective - Soviet withdrawal - had been achieved. The institutions capable of winning a proxy war were not the institutions needed to govern a shattered country.

After 2001, the pattern acquired another layer. The United States built new Afghan security institutions and partnered with irregular counterterrorism forces, including CIA-backed units. Some of those units were tactically valuable and were also accused by human-rights organizations of serious abuses.<sup>5</sup> The partnership created obligations: to the people recruited, to civilians affected by operations, and to the future systems through which former partners would be screened, evacuated, resettled, or abandoned.

The alleged 2025 attack cannot be used to condemn Afghan evacuees as a class. Collective suspicion is exactly the shortcut individualized vetting is supposed to prevent. But neither can the accused man's prior service be dismissed as irrelevant. A state that recruits a local force for a dangerous and morally complicated mission cannot later act as though its members appeared from nowhere when they enter the immigration system. The foreign-policy file and the migration file are the same file.

Latin America makes the return route even easier to see. In Guatemala, the chain begins with a documented intervention, not a speculative theory. President Jacobo Arbenz was democratically elected. His agrarian reform, Decree 900, authorized the expropriation of large tracts of unused land, including land held by the United Fruit Company, with compensation tied to declared tax value. It did not nationalize the entire company. In 1954, the CIA organized and supported Operation PBSUCCESS, which helped overthrow Arbenz and install a government friendlier to U.S. interests.<sup>6</sup>

The coup did not mechanically cause every death that followed. Guatemalan elites, military officers, guerrillas, foreign governments, and Cold War institutions all acted. But the intervention destroyed a constitutional experiment, empowered coercive actors, and narrowed the political field. Guatemala's subsequent armed conflict lasted thirty-six years. The U.N.-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission estimated that more than 200,000 people were killed or disappeared and attributed the overwhelming majority of documented violations to state forces and allied groups.<sup>7</sup> A migration history that begins only when a Guatemalan family reaches the Rio Grande begins decades too late.

Chile requires the same honesty. The United States tried to prevent Salvador Allende from taking office in 1970, funded opposition media and political groups, maintained contacts with coup-minded officers, and pursued an overt and covert policy of opposition to his government. The Senate's Church Committee nevertheless found no evidence that the CIA directly participated in the military operation that overthrew Allende on September 11, 1973.<sup>8</sup> Both facts belong in the same paragraph. Remove either one and history becomes propaganda.

Under Augusto Pinochet, Chile became a central participant in Operation Condor, a multinational system through which the intelligence and security services of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay exchanged information and pursued opponents across borders.<sup>9</sup> Repression created exile. Exile reshaped political communities across the Americas. The consequences did not stop at the national boundaries where the original operation was authorized.

The history of MS-13 shows the return route with unusual clarity. The gang did not descend directly from a Central American death squad. It formed in Los Angeles among Salvadoran youth in communities transformed by migration from civil war. In the 1990s, deportations sent some gang members to countries with weak institutions, recent war trauma, and limited capacity for reintegration. The result was not the export of an ancient Central American gang to the United States, but the transnationalization of a Los Angeles gang through a circuit connecting war, displacement, urban marginalization, deportation, and institutional weakness.<sup>10</sup>

None of this makes a gang member less responsible for murder or extortion. It does reveal a policy loop. The United States supported governments and security systems during regional conflicts; people fled those conflicts; marginalized youth encountered American gang structures; deportation policy exported those structures into fragile postwar states; the resulting violence generated new migration north. We threw more than one brick, and the vase fell more than once.

Venezuela is a harder test because a blowback argument can become lazy there very quickly. It is tempting to describe the country's collapse as the direct result of American sanctions because the United States is powerful and sanctions are visible. That account is wrong. It is equally wrong to claim sanctions were costless because the Venezuelan government bears primary responsibility.

Venezuela nationalized its oil industry in the 1970s, before Hugo Chávez. After his election in 1998, Chávez increased political control over the petroleum sector, required majority state ownership in major projects, dismissed thousands of experienced workers after the 2002-03 oil strike, and redirected revenue while investment and technical capacity deteriorated. Under Nicolás Maduro, authoritarian rule, corruption, price and currency controls, underinvestment, and the fall in oil prices compounded the damage.<sup>11</sup> The economy was already contracting before the broadest U.S. sanctions.

The sanctions chronology still matters. The contemporary sanctions regime broadened in stages: a 2015 executive order targeted officials, 2017 measures restricted access to U.S. financial markets, and 2019 measures sanctioned the state oil company PDVSA. A 2021 Government Accountability Office review concluded that the economy had been declining since 2012 and that sanctions - particularly those affecting the oil sector - likely contributed to the steeper decline by limiting revenue and complicating humanitarian operations.<sup>12</sup> This is not a choice between "Maduro did it" and "Washington did it." Policy interacted with an already collapsing system and increased the costs borne by ordinary people.

By late 2025, nearly 7.9 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela were living outside the country.<sup>13</sup> Most did not move to the United States. Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and other states absorbed the majority, often at enormous political and administrative cost. That distribution is itself part of the moral accounting: powerful states can impose coercive policy while neighboring states and displaced families absorb much of the human consequence.

Sanctions can be justified. So can military assistance, covert action, and border enforcement. The question is not whether a tool is morally pure; no serious tool of statecraft is. The question is whether the state has explained how the tool is supposed to work, compared it with alternatives, monitored civilian effects, defined conditions for revision, and accepted responsibility for foreseeable displacement. Coercion without feedback becomes ritual rather than strategy.

By the time any of these histories reaches an American border, the administrative record starts over. A person crosses a line, appears in a docket, files an application, or enters a detention system. The file begins there. Historical responsibility does not.

A border with a memory would still distinguish citizens from noncitizens. It would still screen applicants, prosecute violence, remove noncitizens after lawful adjudication when they lack a legal right to remain, and defend the public. But it would refuse collective guilt. It would preserve individualized adjudication even after a politically salient crime, and it would connect security databases to the actual histories of partner forces instead of treating service with an American-backed unit as either automatic virtue or automatic suspicion.

It would also require foreign-policy institutions to model displacement as a foreseeable outcome rather than a humanitarian afterthought. Sanctions reviews would include migration and public-health indicators. Security-assistance programs would plan for demobilization, records preservation, and long-term obligations to local partners. Congress would demand post-operation audits that trace not only whether the immediate mission succeeded, but which actors and institutions were strengthened after the mission ended.

Most of all, a border with a memory would reject two evasions. The first says that because the United States influenced a crisis, every migrant has a claim to enter and no individual can be blamed for what he does. The second says that because migrants possess agency and foreign governments commit their own crimes, American policy has no downstream responsibility. Both take a partial truth and inflate it into an absolute.

The harder position is also the more patriotic one. A republic should be able to defend itself without falsifying its history. It should be able to honor Sarah Beckstrom, care about Andrew Wolfe, insist on justice for an alleged attack, and still ask what institutions placed an Afghan veteran of an American-backed partner force inside that chain. It should be able to condemn Maduro, the Taliban, military juntas, and criminal gangs while examining the American choices that altered the environments in which they rose.

Borders are real. So are histories. The person at the border is not the beginning of the story, and the policy that feels most immediate is not always the policy that reaches the cause. If we keep throwing bricks abroad and discussing only the broken vase at home, we are not practicing security. We are practicing amnesia.

1. U.S. Department of Justice, "Afghan National Accused in Ambush Killing of National Guard Member Near White House Is Indicted on Additional Federal Charges," June 16, 2026; Tim Reid and Ted Hesson, "Officials criticize Biden vetting, but Afghan shooting suspect was granted asylum under Trump," Reuters, November 27, 2025. Reuters reported that the accused had worked with a CIA-backed partner force in Kandahar. [Source](#)

2. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "USCIS Implements Additional National Security Measures in the Wake of National Guard Shooting by Afghan National," November 27, 2025. [Source](#)

3. U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, vol. XII, Afghanistan, especially the preface and Documents 76 and 214. The July 3 finding authorized limited nonmilitary support; lethal aid followed the Soviet invasion in late December 1979. [Source](#)

4. Council on Foreign Relations, "The Taliban in Afghanistan," updated 2026; and U.S. Department of State, "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978-1980." [Source](#)

5. Human Rights Watch, "They've Shot Many Like This: Abusive Night Raids by CIA-Backed Afghan Strike Forces," October 31, 2019. The report documents serious alleged abuses by units recruited, trained, equipped, and overseen by the CIA. [Source](#)

6. U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, Guatemala, introduction; Central Intelligence Agency, Guatemala declassification collection. [Source](#)

7. Commission for Historical Clarification, Guatemala: Memory of Silence, conclusions and recommendations, 1999. [Source](#)

8. U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, Covert Action in Chile, 1963-1973, 1975. [Source](#)

9. U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, vol. XXIV, South America; Latin America Region, Document 12, "Paper Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency," 1977. [Source](#)

10. U.S. Department of Justice, Transnational Youth Gangs in Central America, Mexico and the United States, 2006; U.S. Department of Justice, Journal of Federal Law and Practice, "MS-13," 2020. [Source](#)

11. U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Venezuela: Background Reference," data current to January 2019. [Source](#)

12. U.S. Government Accountability Office, Venezuela: Additional Tracking Could Aid Treasury's Efforts to Mitigate Any Adverse Impacts U.S. Sanctions Might Have on Humanitarian Assistance, GAO-21-239, February 2021. [Source](#)

13. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Venezuela Situation," population data updated December 2025. [Source](#)