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# Introduction

## Understanding the Machine

What kind of nation is the United States? Although celebrated in popular mythology as a nation of immigrants that has welcomed foreigners throughout its history, the United States has also deported nearly 57 million people since 1882, more than any other country in the world. During the last century, federal officials have deported more people from the land of freedom and opportunity than they have allowed to remain on a permanent basis. Yet we know little about the vast majority of these expulsions, which have taken place far from public view and without due process. The most visible of these have been the so-called formal deportations, often by order of an immigration judge. Barack Obama's administration formally deported some 3 million people in eight years, and during the 2016 presidential election Donald Trump promised to remove all of the undocumented immigrants who remained after taking office. But formal deportations represent only a small sliver of the total. More than 90 percent of all expulsions throughout US history have been via an administrative process euphemistically referred to as "voluntary departure." Similar to prosecutors in the criminal justice system relying on plea bargains, immigration authorities have depended on voluntary departure, making it seem like the best of all the bad options facing people who have been apprehended. Local, state, and federal officials have also waged concerted fear campaigns, causing an unknown number of others to "self-deport," or pick up and leave, without ever coming into contact with an immigration agent.<sup>1</sup>

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Together, voluntary departures and self-deportations have minimized the federal government's deportation-related expenses and restricted immigrants' rights while achieving the same end: terrorizing communities amid what amounts to mass expulsion. Although scholars and the public have paid scant attention to these other means of deportation, these seemingly less severe methods have been central to immigration enforcement policy for most of the United States' history.<sup>2</sup>

This book explores the history of expulsion and exposes the various ways immigration authorities have forced, coerced, and scared people into leaving the United States from the late nineteenth century to the present. It reveals how public officials have assembled a well-oiled deportation machine, propelled by bureaucratic self-interest as well as the concerns of local communities and private firms. It is a book about how authorities have used the machine's three expulsion mechanisms—formal deportation, voluntary departure, and self-deportation—to exert tremendous control over people's lives by determining who can enter the country and regulating who the state allows to remain. The machine has not always functioned smoothly or at peak capacity, but when it has run on all cylinders undocumented immigrants, and even some authorized immigrants and US citizens, have found themselves under an all-out physical and psychological assault. This, however, is also a book about how undocumented immigrants and their allies have endured, adapted, and resisted, taking to the streets and the courts to demand their constitutional rights and challenge what they have considered to be unjust laws and inhumane treatment. Ultimately, this is a book about power, about how people have exercised it and contested it, and about how both citizens and noncitizens have leveraged struggles over power to define what it means to be American.

Expulsion has long served as a way for communities and nations to assert control over populations that fall within their borders. During the last two millennia, localities and countries around the world have banished foreigners, indigenous people, criminals, the poor, individuals with communicable diseases, and entire religious groups.<sup>3</sup> Since its founding, the US federal government has expelled people across international boundaries and violently relocated others within the nation. In 1798, the Alien and Sedition Acts gave the president the power to deport "alien enemies" in times of war,

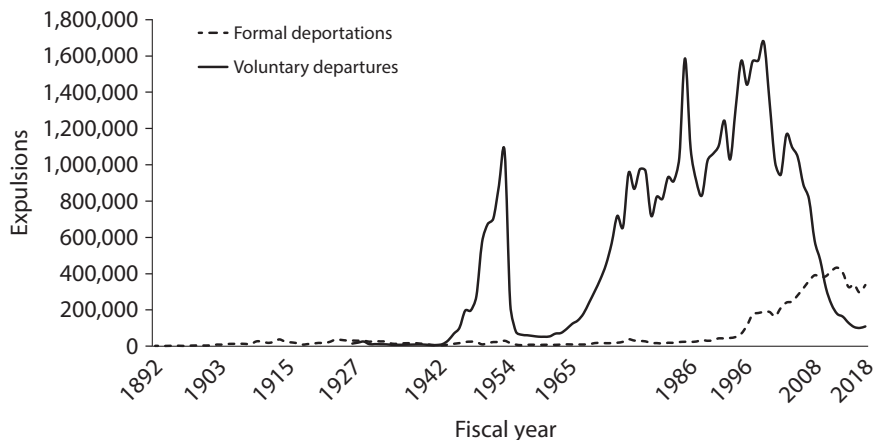
especially supporters of the French Revolution and anyone else believed to be a political radical. For more than a century after the nation's founding, state governments also had the authority to banish people. In the 1850s, the nativist Know-Nothing Party called for, and in some cases implemented, state-level legislation authorizing the removal of Irish Catholics and paupers. From 1855 to 1857, Massachusetts authorities deported more than 4,000 people to Liverpool and different parts of British North America.<sup>4</sup>

The deportation of foreigners forms part of a longer continuum of projects of empire, exploitation, and forced migration throughout US history. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the federal government repeatedly removed Native Americans from their lands, pushing more than 70,000 west of the Mississippi River as part of a settler colonialist project characterized by Anglo expansion and the subordination of indigenous people and Mexicans. Many thousands of Native Americans perished from famine and disease, among other hardships. Around the same time, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 authorized the forcible return of runaway slaves and levied fines on anyone who tried to hide them or help them escape. And from its establishment in 1816, the American Colonization Society advocated for the emigration or expulsion of the free black population from the United States—a cause promoted by founding father Thomas Jefferson and later Abraham Lincoln.<sup>5</sup>

Only in the last decades of the nineteenth century did a series of consequential congressional acts and Supreme Court decisions create the framework for a deportation machine under the exclusive control of a newly created federal immigration bureaucracy.<sup>6</sup> Granting immigration officials the authority to formally expel also meant that they could use the threat of deportation to push people into the shadows or, in some cases, out of the country altogether. This implicit power, as much as the ability to remove someone, constituted a key component of the expulsion apparatus. While federal authorities have formally deported more than 8 million people since 1892, the year they started recording statistics, they have expelled six times as many people via voluntary departure (see figure 1).<sup>7</sup>

What exactly are voluntary departures? In reality, there has been nothing voluntary about them. Rather, they have built upon the United States' long history of using coercion as a basic governing strategy.<sup>8</sup> Unlike people who leave the country on their own volition, individuals who leave via voluntary departure do so in response to a direct administrative order from the

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**Figure 1. Formal deportations and voluntary departures, fiscal years 1892–2018.**

DHS, YOIS: 2018, 103. Graph by author.

federal government. The immigration bureaucracy started counting voluntary departures in 1927, when many scholars believed they began. Yet previously undiscovered archival records reveal that the strategy dates back to the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

Voluntary departures have typically occurred after an agent apprehended someone, coerced the person into agreeing to leave, and then physically removed the individual from the country soon thereafter or confirmed their departure within a set period of time. Unlike formal deportations, which usually have entailed expensive hearings and extended detention stays for people charged with more serious crimes, voluntary departures have enabled low-level officials to use administrative orders to expedite the expulsion of people charged with immigration violations and other minor infractions. They have empowered agents on the border and investigators in immigrant communities to act as both judge and jury. They have allowed officials to deport people on the cheap and prevent immigration courts from getting backlogged. Immigrants have agreed to voluntary departure because the legal repercussions are not as harsh and entail fewer, if any, obstacles to reentering the United States. Until recently, voluntary departures might not have even been recorded on a person's immigration record. By agreeing to leave, people have also minimized their time spent in detention, although doing so

has come at a high cost, resulting in the restriction of their rights and precluding them from fighting their case before an immigration judge. Also, in many instances immigrants coerced into leaving have had to pay their own way out of the country. When people have resisted signing a voluntary departure form, authorities have sometimes threatened them or tricked them into doing so, or even forged their signatures.<sup>10</sup>

Self-deportation, the machine's third expulsion mechanism, has received much attention in recent years, but it too is far from new. In fact, self-deportation's roots are older than the nation itself. In the middle of the eighteenth century, towns in colonial New England implemented a practice known as "warning out" to avoid having to provide for people in need of assistance and to exclude people who might be carrying infectious diseases like smallpox. A precursor of sorts to later self-deportation campaigns, warning out involved officials notifying newcomers that they had to leave town by a certain date or be subject to forcible removal by the constable. In some cases, people ignored these notices and remained in their communities. Others, however, decided to depart preemptively. One family unfamiliar with the practice of warning out before moving to Massachusetts was "very much astonished" when officials served them with a notice to leave. The following morning, after a sleepless night of deliberation, the husband told his wife, "I am going to pack up our things and go somewhere else, for this is no great of a place after all." Hundreds of others met a similar fate.<sup>11</sup>

Since the United States declared its independence, individuals in positions of power—as well as ordinary citizens—have continued to use fear in order to define who belongs to their communities and to determine who must leave. They have deployed dread to rally support for nativist policies and draconian enforcement actions based on a supposed Anglo, Protestant, law-abiding US citizen "us" and a non-Anglo, non-Protestant, criminal-illegal-alien "them." Much of the fear has served as a tool of overt social control. Officials have long used everyday policing, immigration raids, and mass expulsion drives to remove unauthorized immigrants from the country, but they have also relied on the rumors and publicity blitzes surrounding these initiatives to spur self-deportation. Similar to other examples of racial violence in US history, these campaigns may have targeted specific individuals or a relatively small number of people, but they have been meant to terrorize

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entire groups. Even when the threat of expulsion has not scared people into leaving, it has cast a shadow over much of the daily lives of millions.<sup>12</sup>

How important has expulsion been to the history of the United States? Most scholars' attention has gone to formal deportations during particular periods, limiting our ability to grasp deportation's magnitude and changing nature over time.<sup>13</sup> This book is an attempt to see the deportation machine as a whole, looking at all of the forms of expulsion together with the bureaucratic, capitalist, and racist imperatives that have driven them over nearly a century and a half. My work connects historical scholarship on the legal and policy foundations of expulsion to journalistic accounts and social scientific studies of the contemporary enforcement regime and resistance to such policies and practices. And perhaps above all, *The Deportation Machine* argues that these various means of expulsion have been a central feature of American politics and life since before 1900, and particularly in the post-World War II era. The machine's contribution to the growth of state power is remarkable, as is its legacy of creating an exploitable immigrant labor force. Moreover, the malign energies that the machine has unleashed have fueled xenophobia and demonized Asians and Europeans, Mexicans and Central Americans, Arabs and Muslims.<sup>14</sup>

Yet examining expulsion over an extended time span makes something clear: Although Democratic and Republican administrations have targeted different immigrant groups, the history of deportation from the United States has been, for the most part, the history of removing Mexicans. Mexicans make up around half of the undocumented immigrant population in US history, but they account for nine out of every ten deportees. This of course has much to do with the two countries' geographic proximity and intertwined histories of conquest and violence, labor recruitment and migration, economic relations, and family ties. But it also has to do with the distinctive method for deporting most Mexicans.<sup>15</sup>

Even though Mexicans removed through formal deportation far outnumber any other nationality, the expulsion of the overwhelming majority of Mexicans—most of whom had done nothing more than enter the country without inspection or overstay a visa—has come via voluntary departure and self-deportation. Many Mexicans have returned north after expulsion, in part because of the labor demand and higher wages offered in the United

States, and in part because of their long-standing personal connections as well as, until recently, the border's relative porousness. Immigration officials have deported many individuals on multiple occasions, sometimes while they attempted to cross the border, other times as they went about their business in a place they had lived for years or even decades. Some historians have described voluntary departures and self-deportation drives as part of a nod-and-wink agreement between immigration authorities and agricultural business interests that, for most of the twentieth century, made it seem like the former was doing its job, while keeping the latter happy by enabling a steady flow of disposable Mexican workers. However, these other means of deportation have been anything but superficial enforcement tactics. Repeated apprehensions, detentions, and deportations have affected Mexicans' material and psychological well-being, as has living in the United States under the constant threat of forcible separation from one's family. Over time, the machine has helped create and solidify the stereotype of Mexicans as prototypical "illegal aliens."<sup>16</sup>

When I began working on this book a decade ago, the first person I went to see was Marian Smith, chief of the Historical Research Branch of the Department of Homeland Security's US Citizenship and Immigration Services. That morning, in her office in a generic building located north of Washington, DC's Union Station, Smith told me what a historian embarking on a new project hopes to never hear: despite the wealth of materials documenting the immigration service's history, there were no records on voluntary departures, much less on self-deportations. There was nothing for me to look at. "That was the whole point," she explained. The government's effort to streamline expulsions and cut enforcement expenses depended not only on reducing the use of detention and bypassing removal hearings, but also on minimizing the processing of apprehended immigrants—and the voluminous records that would generate.<sup>17</sup>

How does one write a history of something designed to leave no paper trail? Compounding this challenge was the fact that the available federal immigration records at the National Archives only cover the period up to March 1957. Some agency files dated after that were destroyed, others are missing, and most of the rest remain unprocessed and therefore inaccessible.<sup>18</sup> In any case, official accounts do not shed much light on expulsion's



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impact on those most affected: deportees and their families. Their voices and perspectives are largely absent from institutional records. Yet in the years that followed my meeting with Marian Smith, I discovered fragments of this undocumented history scattered across North America. Some popped up in frequently consulted collections in well-known archives, albeit usually in folders that at first glance didn't have anything to do with deportation. I found other key sources in obscure, far-flung places, from a storage unit in a building along the 110 freeway in downtown Los Angeles and the basement of the US federal district court a few blocks away, to the cramped sixth-floor office of a legal aid organization next to the state capitol in Boston; from the backrooms of a century-old church on the South Side of Chicago, to the folksy National Border Patrol Museum in El Paso, Texas; from the plaza of a small town in the central-western Mexican state of Jalisco, to a tightly controlled government repository in an unmarked warehouse in Mexico City. I conducted archival research, crunched numbers from dozens of internal statistical reports, filed Freedom of Information Act requests, and interviewed migrants and deportees, their family members, lawyers, union organizers, and immigration officials. Eventually, the workings of the deportation machine and the experiences of the people it targeted came into view.

The pages that follow illustrate the great—and often unrecognized—lengths the country has gone to purge recent arrivals and long-term residents alike. They also show how people have fought back by identifying the machine's weak points and pressing on them. This is therefore a history of considerable consequence for citizens and noncitizens, families and local communities. It is a history that has shaped individuals' lives and the nation's trajectory. Both timely and timeless, it is a history we all must reckon with in order to understand the making of modern America.

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