



IMMIGRATION

Smugglers making major profits from border surge

Migrants pay big money for long, miserable journey to U.S.

By **STEPHEN DINAN**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

This is the first in a weekly three-part series.

Victoria Perez spent 10 months as a migrant smuggler. When agents finally caught up with her, she told them she had made \$200,000 over that time, working two days a week, driving migrants through a Border Patrol highway checkpoint near El Paso, Texas.

She charged \$1,500 per person when the checkpoint was operating but only \$600 when the checkpoint was closed because the risk was low and the roads were wide open, she told agents.

The \$200,000 she earned for what was essentially part-time work exceeds the annual salary of a member of Congress. It works out to three times the starting pay for a Border Patrol agent.

Perez was, in essence, a gig worker, contracting herself as a driver for a much larger organization.

It has become an accepted part of border wisdom that the



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INHUMANITY: Migrants sold on the American dream are seen as products rather than people to cartels and their smuggling franchises.

who tracks smuggling tactics. "There's huge, huge money being made right now."

Talk to anyone familiar with the cartels, and they will inevitably start speaking in business terms. People are the product, and their families are the customers paying to smuggle them into the U.S. The cartels franchise the operations to coordinators and independent operators such as Perez.

What the cartels are selling is a vision: the American dream. People who have the cash or, more often, are willing to go into debt pay big money to chase that dream.

What the organizations bring to the table is logistics. The coordinators arrange housing, meals and transportation for tens of thousands of people each month who make the trip, and the cartels take a cut of the profit.

The Washington Times has tracked smuggling cases along the southwestern border for several years and maintains a database based on affidavits from Border Patrol agents, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, and Customs and Border Protection officers. The accounts in this article are chiefly based on those interviews.

According to The Times' data, Mexicans paid an average of about \$7,900 in February 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic upended cross-border traffic. The

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► **Mayorkas:** Decision to ban 'illegal alien' about dignity. **A3** ► **Smugglers dump 5-year-old girl** by gap in border wall. **A3**

surge of illegal immigrants is enriching the cartels. That's true to some extent, but most of the money ends up not in the hands

of the Gulf Cartel or Zetas, but in the pockets of people like Perez. And 2021 is turning into a boom year. Based on the number

of migrants and the prices they are paying, smugglers are easily on track for their biggest profits in history.

"Demand is so strong that the prices are going up," said Todd Bensman, a fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies

CALIFORNIA

'Soros DA' faces recall campaign after only six months

'Soft on crime' tack irks voters

By **JAMES VARNEY**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascon, criticized as being soft on crime, is facing a recall drive just six months after taking office, making him an anomaly among prosecutors whose campaigns were funded by left-wing billionaire George Soros.

A beneficiary of Mr. Soros' Justice & Public Safety PAC, Mr. Gascon joined a phalanx of Democratic prosecutors aiming to deal with crime by employing social justice tactics such as reducing charges and sentences against accused or convicted criminals, ending gang task forces and easing parole requirements.

Some of the outcomes have been less than encouraging. Los Angeles Police Chief Michel Moore has reported a 73% increase in shootings during the first four months of this year compared with the same period last year. The city is on pace to have about 340 killings by the end of the year after recording its highest death tally in more than a decade — 350 — in 2020.

"All of the steps he has taken, from ending the gang unit to dropping all enhancements and

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SECURITY

Ransomware attack hits members of House

Hackers seize web tool used to communicate with constituents

By **RYAN LOVELACE**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Cyber villains have attacked a web tool that members of the House of Representatives use to communicate with voters.

iConstituent was hit with ransomware, which holds data and systems hostage until their targets provide payment to the cyberattackers. Nearly 60 lawmakers' offices were affected,

said Sen. Rob Portman, Ohio Republican.

The House's chief administrative officer said it is unaware that the cyberattack affected the data.

"The Office of the Chief Administrative Officer was notified by iConstituent that their e-newsletter system was hit with a ransomware attack. iConstituent's e-newsletter system is an external service available for House offices to purchase," the

office of the chief administrative officer said in a statement. "At this time, the CAO is not aware of any impact to House data. The CAO is coordinating with the impacted offices supported by iConstituent and has taken measures to ensure that the attack does not affect the House network and offices' data."

A flood of ransomware attacks against U.S. entities in recent weeks has disrupted food production, fuel supply and other

business. At a Senate hearing about ransomware Tuesday, Mr. Portman said the attack on the House members' constituent services tool showed that anyone can be affected.

"Just this morning, news broke that a constituent outreach services platform that nearly 60 offices in the United States Congress, the House of

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VULNERABLE: "As I've said before, no one is safe from these attacks — including us," Sen. Rob Portman said at a hearing.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Death penalty opponents frustrated, press Biden to keep promise

By **JEFF MORDOCK**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Activists and civil rights groups frustrated about the president's inaction on a key campaign promise are pressuring the Biden administration to end federal executions.

"As the first U.S. president to

openly oppose the death penalty and to have campaigned on an anti-death-penalty platform, it is disappointing that President Biden has yet to speak publicly on the topic of capital punishment or take any concrete steps to fulfill his promise of abolition," said Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, executive director of the Catholic

Mobilizing Network.

The Catholic group and hundreds of other organizations and individuals have sent letters or launched campaigns demanding that Mr. Biden keep his pledge. They include a coalition of former prosecutors and public defenders, a bipartisan group of former prosecutors, attorneys

general and retired judges, more than 175 relatives of murder victims, and 80 civil rights groups.

More than 100 days into his presidency, Mr. Biden has remained silent about federal executions — a tentpole of his campaign pledge to reduce racial disparities in the criminal justice system.

In his first week as president, Mr. Biden signed a series of executive orders on racial equity and criminal justice, but a moratorium on federal executions was missing.

The Justice Department has not scheduled any executions, so

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REFUGEE: Thousands of Ethiopians have fled Tigray because of indiscriminate killings, widespread hunger and sexual violence.

FOREIGN POLICY

Tigray violence threatens Ethiopian election integrity, Biden diplomacy

By **TONNY ONYULO**
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA | Berhe Gebremariam, sitting quietly on the edge of the bed of his one-room home in Addis Ababa's sprawling Gulele neighborhood, talked about hope for an end to his country's political crisis.

Africa's second most populous country is preparing to hold general elections June 21, but many people are questioning whether they will be free and fair. The civil war in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region continues, ethnic violence is mounting, a nasty fight with Egypt and Sudan over access to the Nile grinds on, and major

logistical hurdles to educating electoral staff and printing and allocating ballot papers remain.

"I will not actually participate in upcoming elections if the political violence escalates," said Mr. Gebremariam, 48, who owns an electronics shop. "Our

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Chase Young turns heads at Washington's first minicamp. B12

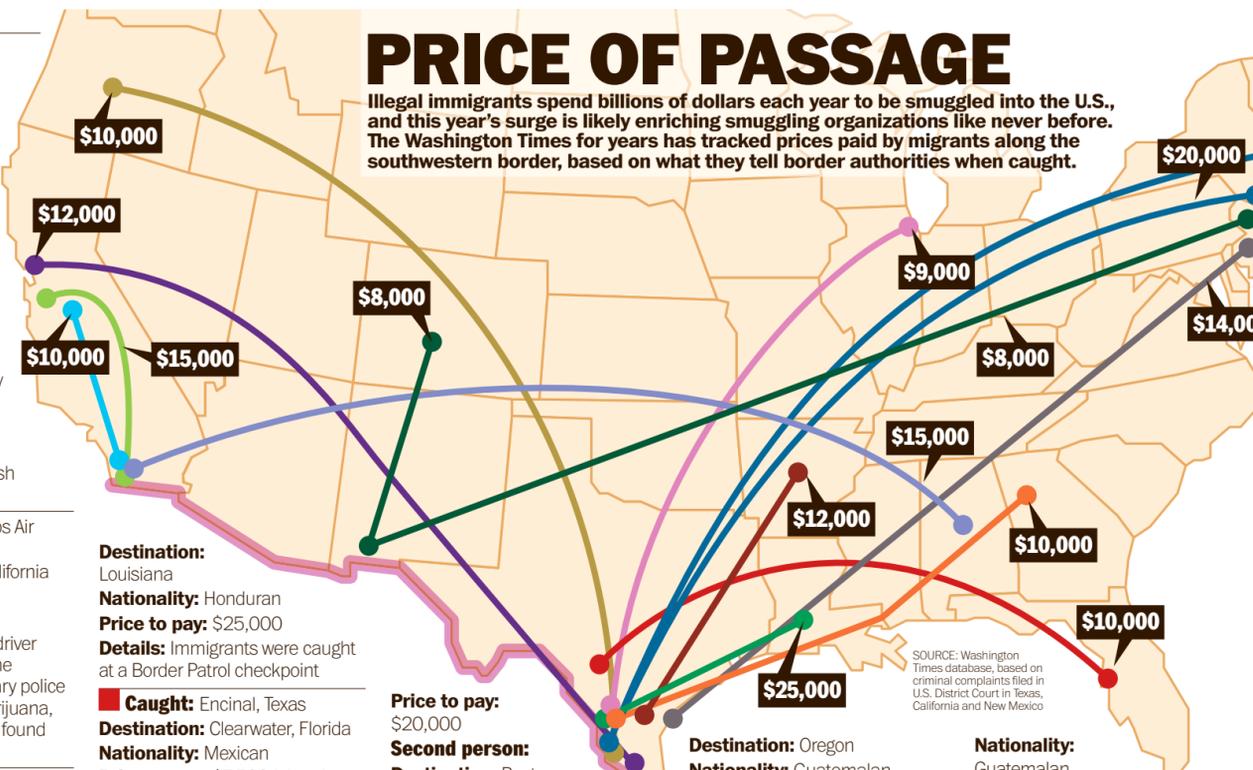
VOLUME 39, NUMBER 114



PRICE OF PASSAGE

Illegal immigrants spend billions of dollars each year to be smuggled into the U.S., and this year's surge is likely enriching smuggling organizations like never before. The Washington Times for years has tracked prices paid by migrants along the southwestern border, based on what they tell border authorities when caught.

- Caught:** Pharr, Texas
Destination: San Francisco
Nationality: Salvadoran
Price to pay: \$12,000
Details: Immigrants were apprehended at a stash house
- Caught:** Deming, N.M. (two people)
Destination: Colorado
Nationality: Mexican
Price to pay: \$8,000
Second person: \$15,000
Destination: New Jersey
Nationality: Mexican
Price to pay: \$8,000
Details: Local police reported a suspected stash house
- Caught:** Marine Corps Air Station Miramar
Destination: Fresno, California
Nationality: Mexican
Price to pay: \$10,000
Details: The smuggling driver made a wrong turn into the Marine Corps base. Military police detected the smell of marijuana, searched the vehicle and found illegal immigrants
- Caught:** Laredo, Texas
Destination: Atlanta
Nationality: Mexican
Price to pay: \$10,000
Details: A Border Patrol checkpoint dog alerted on the vehicle for drugs or concealed people
- Caught:** Laredo, Texas



- Destination:** Louisiana
Nationality: Honduran
Price to pay: \$25,000
Details: Immigrants were caught at a Border Patrol checkpoint
- Caught:** Encinal, Texas
Destination: Clearwater, Florida
Nationality: Mexican
Price to pay: \$7,500 (already paid \$2,500)
Details: A Border Patrol camera detected activity in a known smuggling corridor
- Caught:** San Ygnacio, Texas (two people)
Destination: New York
Nationality: Dominican

- Price to pay:** \$20,000
Second person: \$10,000
Destination: Boston
Nationality: Dominican
Price to pay: \$14,000
Details: A Border Patrol agent saw a Ford Expedition pulled over with its hood up, and stopped to conduct a welfare check. The agent discovered illegal immigrants
- Caught:** Zapata, Texas

- Destination:** Oregon
Nationality: Guatemalan
Price to pay: \$10,000
Details: A Border Patrol agent spotted a vehicle weighted down in the rear, suggesting a heavy load of people
- Caught:** Padre Island National Seashore
Destination: New Jersey

- Nationality:** Guatemalan
Price to pay: \$14,000
Details: Agents patrolling the park because of increased smuggling spotted two trucks whose location and timing signaled they were involved in smuggling
- Caught:** Laredo, Texas
Destination: Chicago

- Nationality:** Mexican
Price to pay: \$9,000 (\$3,000 upfront to cross the border)
Details: A Border Patrol checkpoint dog alerted on the vehicle for drugs or concealed people
- Caught:** San Ysidro (California) Port of Entry
Destination: San Jose, California
Nationality: Mexican
Price to pay: \$15,000
Details: Illegal immigrants were discovered in the trunk of a Nissan Versa
- Caught:** Falfurrias, Texas
Destination: Arkansas
Nationality: Salvadoran
Price to pay: \$12,000
Details: An agent patrolling near a checkpoint spotted someone jumping out of a car and stopped to investigate
- Caught:** Otay Mesa, Calif.
Destination: Alabama
Nationality: Mexican
Price to pay: About \$15,000 for a husband and wife
Details: Customs and Border Protection officers spotted a group of migrants trying to blend in with construction workers near the border crossing

SOURCE: Washington Times database, based on criminal complaints filed in U.S. District Court in Texas, California and New Mexico

SMUGGLE

From page A1

average payment this February rose to about \$8,900. Central Americans' average payment increased from about \$9,400 last year to \$11,000. Rates have held fairly steady in the months since.

Who's getting paid?

For some migrants, the first contact with a smuggling organization begins in South America or even farther afield. Federal authorities in recent years have broken up several smuggling operations that they said specialized in guiding migrants from terrorism-tinged parts of the world such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. They travel through Brazil and then up the spine of the Western Hemisphere to reach the U.S. border.

Most of the migrants, though, are likely to begin their transactions with hawkers in plazas in southern Mexico or Central America.

Victor Manjarrez, a former chief patrol agent in the Border Patrol's Tucson, Arizona, sector and now a professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, said the scene is like something out of Las Vegas, where street hawkers pass out flyers for shows on the Strip.

The product the smugglers are selling is the fastest or safest trip north. In some cases, it's a two-for-one promise: If you get caught the first time, then the smugglers will give you a second attempt free of charge.

Migrants fork out payments along the trip for every bus ride, boat trip or foot guide.

Darlyn Josue Mass-Montenegro, a Honduran man nabbed in 2019 as part of a group of 23 migrants in a truckload of watermelons, gave agents the breakdown of the \$13,000 tab for reaching Los Angeles: \$3,000 in Honduras; \$1,500 in Monterrey and \$2,000 in Tamaulipas, Mexico; \$1,500 to the stash house operator who kept him holed up at a car wash in McAllen, Texas; and \$2,000 in Houston. The remainder was due once he reached Los Angeles.

That doesn't include out-of-pocket costs.

Many migrants who take the land route to Panama cross the forbidding jungle of the Darien Gap and emerge at the village of Bajo Chiquito. There, they pay \$5 for a canoe ride downriver to a migrant camp. Such scenes are repeated dozens of times across a journey.

The big money, though, is collected near the U.S. border.

Someone usually houses the migrants on the Mexican side. Migrants owe a "piso" or "mafia fee" to whatever cartel controls the approach they're taking to cross the border. They also must pay a foot guide to take them through the desert or someone to raft them across the Rio Grande, and a driver to pick them up and transport them to a stash house on the U.S. side, where they wait



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

U.S. agents often find migrants crammed into vehicles along the border. Temperatures of trunks and other smuggling compartments regularly top 100 degrees in the summer.



Migrants pay fees to dozens of people on their way to the U.S., but few have the cash upfront. They borrow from family, friends or neighbors and sometimes go into debt to smuggling cartels with plans to work it off.

for a long-haul driver to try to get them through the network of Border Patrol checkpoints that act as secondary borders.

The checkpoint is the key step for most migrants. Once they make it through the checkpoint, they are in the interior of the U.S. and are unlikely to be caught, much less deported.

Drivers might earn about \$50 per person to ferry migrants along local routes from the border to nearby stash houses.

Stash house operators get more. Eduardo Salinas, nabbed May 24 in Eagle Pass, Texas, by

agents who heard he was threatening migrants at the stash house he was running, told agents he was paid \$500 per person. He was holding six people at the time he was arrested.

Bringing food to a stash house can earn a couple of hundred bucks a week.

Scouts, who track Border Patrol movements or run interference on driving routes, also can make a couple of hundred per job.

Truck drivers are usually paid the most. A single run can net tens of thousands of dollars.

Richard Codoluto, nabbed by

agents last month with 45 illegal immigrants inside his tractor-trailer, said he was getting \$15,000 for the trip and had made 10 or so previous runs.

Rafael Cazarez, arrested May 28 near Laredo with a load of 54 migrants in a truck, told agents he charged a "flat rate" of \$50,000 for each run. He said that was his eighth trip.

Some smugglers stop for food and pick up snacks for the migrants. Others treat them like merchandise. They lock the migrants inside compartments, zip them into suitcases or force them

into car trunks.

Things can go tragically wrong, particularly in the summer heat along much of the border. Agents often take the temperatures of compartments where they find migrants stashed and regularly find the thermometer topping 100 degrees.

Agents at a California checkpoint nabbed two people carrying two illegal immigrants in the trunk of a Nissan Sentra in the June heat. Using a Fluke 917 Temperature Humidity Meter, agents measured 134 degrees in the trunk. The Mexican migrants had paid \$8,000 apiece for the trip. The smugglers were sentenced to time served.

Two months later, agents at the same checkpoint in the desert just south of the Salton Sea found migrants stashed in the trunk of a Toyota Corolla. They recorded a temperature of 158 degrees.

Judges often respond with stiff sentences.

Juan Contreras was sentenced last month to nearly 11 years in prison for migrant smuggling — his third conviction — after he was found carrying 35 illegal immigrants in the trailer of his truck, which broke down on the side of Interstate 35.

The tow truck driver heard banging from inside the trailer and called Border Patrol. Agents arrived to find that the migrants had punched holes in the trailer to try to escape the heat. Two had passed out and were rushed to a

hospital for treatment. Contreras admitted that he never tried to help the migrants.

The border surge this year has been accompanied by a rise in deaths. Drownings, death by exposure and highway accidents are increasing, law enforcement officials say.

Those who study the smuggling operations say rough treatment is common. They aren't surprised when migrants are viewed as cargo or merchandise.

The FBI brought charges April 30 against two people who agents said ran an extortion operation in New Mexico, where migrants were held and beaten until their families paid extra. The violence was captured on video and sent to relatives to hasten the payments.

One family paid \$7,000 to have a Honduran man released. Another man, from the country of Georgia, said his family paid \$10,000.

That same day in Houston, police got a call from a woman who said she had paid \$11,000 to smuggle her brother from Honduras into the U.S. and was told he was being held for an additional \$6,300 ransom. Police tracked down the smugglers' cellphone number, sent in a SWAT team and found 97 illegal immigrants stuffed into two rooms with dead-bolt locks to prevent escape.

The need for cash during the pandemic has created a large pool

SMUGGLE

From page A8

of people willing to smuggle, but some stand out.

Perez, the woman who earned \$200,000 in 10 months of smuggling migrants around a highway checkpoint, walked the route herself and mapped it out.

She knew the 2-mile hike took two hours. She would drop off migrants just west of the checkpoint, drive through the checkpoint alone and then wait a couple of hours at a rest stop before heading to the pickup spot. Her usual destination was Dallas.

Perez was nabbed in December 2019 while dropping off 12 people before the checkpoint. At \$1,500 a head, she stood to make \$18,000 for that load alone.

She told agents her employer was a man in a Juarez, Mexico, prison and paid her by MoneyGram.

Perez pleaded guilty to that smuggling charge and was ordered to report to prison six months later, but she was arrested again in another smuggling attempt in May 2020. She told agents she was trying to make some quick cash to support her son while she was behind bars.

Francisco Javier Ayala-Reyes, arrested at a Border Patrol checkpoint in Texas in October with two illegal immigrants in his SUV, told agents he had been involved in smuggling since age 11. He was to be paid \$3,200 per person when he dropped off the two sisters in Houston.

He said he picked up the women from a stash house, where he saw 30 illegal immigrants as well as drugs. He selected the two women for the run because they looked the most "American." He figured they would be less likely to be flagged at the checkpoint.

He told the women to rub some oil on their hands, but the oil turned out to have some properties of marijuana. When he arrived at the checkpoint near Sarita, a Border Patrol dog trained to sniff out drugs and smuggled humans alerted on the vehicle.

He was sentenced last month to time served in prison plus three months of house arrest. He also was ordered to undergo



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Migrants looking to cross the U.S. border are prey to smugglers hoping to cash in from the latest surge.

substance abuse treatment.

Ayala-Reyes preferred American-looking migrants, but Jose Rene Gonzalez told agents he usually asked for Chinese because they were usually smaller and easier to conceal. He got a 28-month sentence for a 2019 attempt.

Sometimes it is illegal immigrants who are pressured into doing the smuggling.

Agents this month nabbed a carload of migrants who said the smuggler insisted that one of them drive the SUV. The smuggler followed in another vehicle. Agents charged the Mexican illegal immigrant, who paid \$10,000 for the trip and then got recruited to drive, but the man who orchestrated the scheme got away.

Who's paying?

Taken as a whole, migrants are paying billions of dollars a year to be smuggled.

The rate can vary dramatically. It depends on where the migrant is from, the route they take and, in particular, how they choose to enter the U.S.

Among the more expensive options is being boated up the California coast and dropped off

at a San Diego beach. Mexicans pay perhaps \$15,000 for the trip.

Coming through an official border crossing stashed in a car trunk or stuffed into an after-market compartment between the engine and glove compartment — a surprisingly common method — also commands top dollar. A common rate in recent months is \$18,000.

Chinese migrants smuggled through those border crossings pay the highest rates, according to The Times' database, with some topping \$70,000. The average rate is nearly \$30,000.

Swimming the Rio Grande or walking over the border in Arizona or California is usually the cheapest way. Some migrants say they paid as little as \$500, but a \$20,000 tab is not uncommon for Brazilians and \$17,000 is a frequent rate for Ecuadorians.

Mexicans usually have the lowest payments. Central Americans come in slightly higher.

Meralis Reanos-Canales told agents she paid \$9,000 to smugglers for her journey from Honduras. She was shuttled between stash houses on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande before she got a chance to cross. She was given

a wristband — a tactic smugglers use so they know who is going where — and then swam across the river as part of a group of 35 people.

Once on the banks in the U.S., the migrants ran away from agents before they were loaded into trucks and taken to stash houses.

Ms. Reanos-Canales said she went first to a trailer and then to a "factory," where hundreds of people were kept. After two weeks and another \$1,800, she was told she could leave. The smugglers put her into a Nissan Altima with a driver and three other migrant women. They made it through a Border Patrol checkpoint by lying about their citizenship, but a sheriff's deputy later stopped the Nissan for speeding and uncovered the smuggling attempt.

Few have upfront cash for the trip. They borrow from family, friends or neighbors and sometimes go into debt to cartels with plans to work it off once they reach their destinations. Most find their own way to northern Mexico and hook up with smugglers for the final push into the U.S.

Mr. Manjarrez said 40 to 50

people can be involved in a single migrant's journey, and each of them is getting a cut of the money.

Mr. Bensman compared it to a relay race, with migrants as batons handed off from one person to another.

Everyone knows their territory. Some specialize in mountains, and others get migrants onto the trains that run across Mexico. They have relationships with local authorities and know whom to pay to ease the passage.

Mr. Bensman once tried to arrange a fake smuggling trip north from Central America. He was told it would cost \$1,000 just to move someone from Costa Rica to Nicaragua.

"They said, 'We need the money to pay the police,'" he said.

The cartels, which sometimes oversee the trips, come into play when it's time to cross the border.

They control the approaches and charge for each crossing through their territory. Some agents refer to it as a "mafia fee," and migrants call it a "piso." The fee can range from a couple of hundred dollars to more than \$1,000.

During a visit in the Rio Grande Valley several years ago, Mr. Manjarrez said, agents told him they had calculated that the cartel controlling the routes into that region made \$100 million over the previous 12 months simply from fees paid by folks taking those routes.

That's one cartel in one region of the border.

The Rand Corp. developed its own estimates. It calculated that pisos paid by migrants from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala in 2017 ranged from \$30 million to \$180 million.

'The winners are the cartels'

Like so much about illegal immigration, a massive range of uncertainty is involved. For one thing, it's impossible to know exactly how many people are coming across the border.

The government reports arrests, but Customs and Border Protection declined to release its data to The Times on "gotaways," or migrants known to have crossed but evaded capture.

In Texas, the Department of

Public Safety runs a network of cameras at the border and calculates that the number of gotaways is up 156% from last year.

Cochise County in Arizona, which also runs its own camera system, calculated that only 27.6% of migrants spotted jumping the border from July through January were caught by Border Patrol agents.

Using that "probable capture rate" as a rough yardstick means that if agents borderwide nabbed 96,974 migrants last month, another 250,000 or so made it through. Even assuming the "gotaway" rate is higher in Arizona's remote areas than in Texas, many people still don't show up in the monthly apprehension statistics.

The gotaway numbers don't account for those who sneak into the U.S. by hiding in car trunks, gas cans or other nooks and crannies in vehicles coming through the official border crossings or who are carried by boat or personal watercraft north along the coast.

Agents generally figure that the ratio of gotaways versus those apprehended is steady. If the rate of apprehensions doubles, so does the number of people who evade capture. That means the smuggling world's income is growing along with it.

Given that Border Patrol arrests more than tripled from about 30,000 in February 2020 to about 97,000 last month, it stands to reason that the smuggling world's income also has tripled, assuming all else is the same.

"The winners here in open borders are the cartels," said Mark Morgan, a former chief of the Border Patrol and acting commissioner at Customs and Border Protection in the Trump administration.

Business is so good that operations are expanding. The Big Bend area of Texas, which is so rugged and remote that smugglers usually have avoided it, has suddenly become active.

"They've got so much revenue now and so many more resources available to them they're able to take these tactics and open up new franchises now, and Big Bend is one of the franchises now," Mr. Morgan said.

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PLUGGED IN: Smartphones play a large role in illegal immigration from the south. Often lured by photos sent by relatives and friends who have reached the U.S., migrants find apps to be vital resources in their own attempts to cross the border.

IMMIGRATION

Smartphones, social media reshape smuggling operations

Apps used in 68% of border crimes, database review finds

By **STEPHEN DINAN**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Second of three parts

Mark Delgado told Border Patrol agents he was scrolling through TikTok one day when he came across a video asking for drivers and offering \$4,000 a trip.

He needed the money, so he reached out to the guy on WhatsApp, a messaging service owned by Facebook. They made arrangements to meet this month

in the Rio Grande Valley, where the TikTok recruiter put a man in the trunk of Mr. Delgado's Nissan Altima and piled clothes on top to try to conceal the migrant, according to court documents.

Mr. Delgado was sent on his way with a warning — stay relaxed while going through the Border Patrol checkpoint — and a promise of \$5,200 when the migrant was dropped off outside Houston.

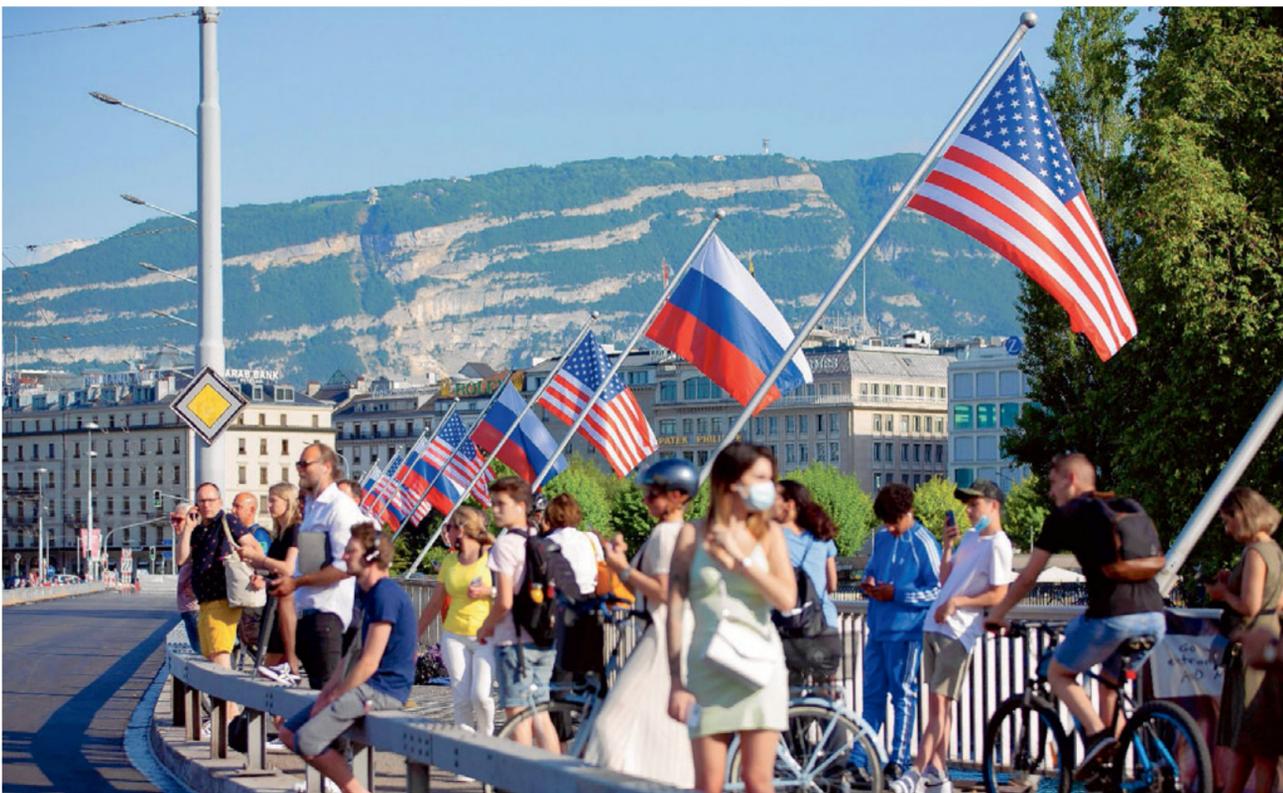
A canine at the checkpoint alerted on Mr. Delgado's car, and agents found the migrant. Agents said Mr. Delgado begged

them to cut him a break: "Can't you let me go since this is my first time?"

A day later, at the same checkpoint, agents nabbed another man, Alvaro Vazquez-Ruiz, who said he was recruited over Telegram, another social media app. He was promised \$1,500 for every person he was able to get through the checkpoint.

He turned the fuel tank of his Ford F-350 truck into a compartment to hide

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SUMMIT GREETINGS: U.S. and Russian flags lined the Mont Blanc Bridge in Geneva on Tuesday, the eve of a series of meetings between President Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Mr. Biden said he hopes the Russian leader will be motivated by a desire to change "the perception that the world has in him."

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Biden to confront Putin on malicious actions

Russian takes defiant stance on U.S. accusations

By **DAVE BOYER**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

President Biden is bringing a long list of U.S. grievances to his highly anticipated summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Switzerland on Wednesday.

Consider some of Moscow's actions in the past decade. Russia has:

- Interfered in the U.S. presidential elections in 2016 and 2020, according to U.S. intelligence officials.

Mr. Putin rejects the accusations. Pointing to the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol, he says the U.S. is hypocritical when it tells other countries how to run a democracy.

"They weren't just a crowd of robbers and rioters. Those people had come with political demands," the Russian leader told NBC News.

- Harbored hackers who have waged ransomware attacks this spring on key parts of the U.S. economy. The cyberattacks have disrupted operations at a fuel pipeline company, a major meat supplier and other entities.

Again, the Russian president denies any knowledge of the attacks.

"Where is [the] evidence? Where is [the] proof? It's becoming farcical," Mr. Putin said this weekend.

- Initiated through its foreign intelligence service the SolarWinds cyberattack against several

» see **SUMMIT** | A9



PUMPED UP: Ransomware attacks such as the one that disrupted gas supplies last month in the U.S. are on Mr. Biden's list of grievances for Mr. Putin.

REPUBLICANS

Election audit turns Arizona into a mecca for candidates

Examining process helps hone messages

By **SETH McLAUGHLIN**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Kristina Karamo wants voters to know she made the 2,000-mile trek from Michigan to Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Phoenix to get a firsthand glimpse of the Maricopa County election audit that has become a cause celebre for supporters of former President Donald Trump.

Ms. Karamo, a candidate for secretary of state, is among a growing number of Republicans running for public office who have made the pilgrimage to Arizona to learn about the process and pay homage to Mr. Trump and his supporters.

"I think it is the next chapter in the political wave that is the Trump presidency and the residual aftereffects," said Stan Barnes, an Arizona-based Republican Party strategist. "The audit itself is a historic anomaly in Arizona, and in the afterglow of the 2020 election outcome, it is surreal but important, and it is going to have its effects not only in Arizona but all over the country."

It is not out of the ordinary for politicians to make fact-finding missions to other states to bolster their mastery of issues, hone their messages and

» see **ELECTION** | A9

ECONOMY

Theorists dismiss debt worries, say government can spend all it wants

By **JAMES VARNEY**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The \$6 trillion budget President Biden has proposed may strike many Americans as astronomical, but one school of thought supports his spending binge and much more.

Supporters of Modern Monetary Theory say the brand of economics signals a brave new world, but detractors fear it could lead to fiscal calamity.

"I'm not sure any White House economists would describe themselves as MMT adherents, but the policies they are pursuing sure do look a lot like MMT or MMT-lite," said Tyler Goodspeed, a Stanford University economist and former chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers.

The core principle of Modern Monetary Theory is that a government that controls its money, and thus has what is known as a "sovereign currency," will never default because it can print as much

» see **BUDGET** | A5

PHILANTHROPY

Americans set new record in charitable giving

By **MARK A. KELLNER**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Americans remained among the world's most charitable people last year, increasing their donations 5% despite pandemic-induced shutdowns, layoffs and economic turmoil, a survey released Tuesday found.

Individuals, bequests, foundations and corporations gave an estimated \$471.44 billion to U.S. charities in 2020, according to "Giving USA 2021: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2020."

"Total charitable giving grew 5.1% measured in current dollars over the revised total of \$448.66

Money flows during pandemic, turmoil

billion contributed in 2019. Adjusted for inflation, total giving increased 3.8%," states the survey, which has been published each year since 1956 and is billed as "the longest running, most comprehensive report on philanthropy in America."

Individual giving increased 2.2% to \$324.1 billion. Although that was the highest total dollar figure to date, the Giving USA report said, it "comprised less than 70% of total giving for the third consecutive

year."

Charitable foundations donated an estimated \$88.5 billion, a 17% increase over 2019's total and the category's "highest-ever dollar amount," according to the survey. Bequests totaled \$41.19 billion in 2020, up 10.3% from 2019, but corporate giving dropped 6.1%, to \$16.88 billion, last year.

Giving to religion, one of the largest donation categories, totaled \$131.08 billion in 2020, up 1% before being adjusted for inflation. After those adjustments, religious giving was down 0.2% from 2019, the survey reported.

» see **CHARITY** | A9

POLITICS

Justice Department plan seeks to root out domestic terrorism. A3

NATION

Southern Baptists open annual meeting amid push from right. A6

WORLD

U.S., EU reach deal to end Boeing, Airbus subsidies dispute. A8

METRO

Maryland at record low positivity rate, to lift mandates on July 1. A10

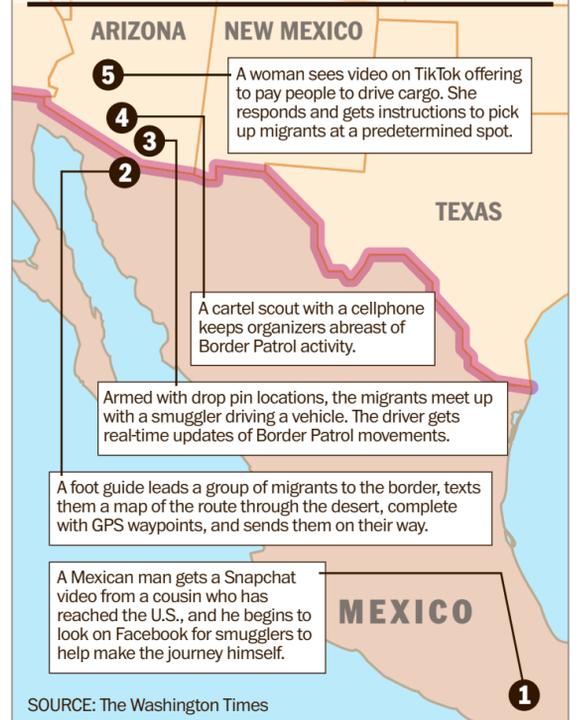
VOLUME 39, NUMBER 118





Scouts use smartphone communication to alert smugglers to Border Patrol agents. In some cases, smugglers use technology to make sure illegal border crossers are spotted. While agents are distracted by the migrants, smugglers sneak more valuable loads across the U.S. border.

SMARTPHONE SMUGGLING
Social media and cellphone connections are becoming indispensable for illegal immigrants making the journey north, and the smugglers who shepherd them along the way. Here's a snapshot of a hypothetical journey.



BORDER

From page A1

a migrant, but the smugglers told him he had to transport two people, so he tried to stash the second person underneath the back seat. Agents manning the checkpoint spotted that person and swooped in to make the arrest, according to court files.

Social media apps such as TikTok, Snapchat, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp have upended the smuggling world.

Connecting a driver to a group of migrants is as easy as messaging a GPS “pin” location. Scouts can alert smugglers to Border Patrol agents so they can avoid them or, in some cases, to make sure the migrants are spotted, distracting agents while a more valuable load is sneaked through.

FBI agents in California revealed that smugglers holding illegal immigrants for ransom also use WhatsApp to arrange meetups with relatives to transfer the cash.

Recent news reports show smugglers advertise their services on social media like regular businesses. The difference is that the “customers” are desperately poor migrants willing to go \$10,000 into debt for an attempt to cross illegally into the U.S.

The value and dangers of a smartphone

There seem to be few areas where social media has not touched the smuggling world and few cases where it is not a factor.

The Washington Times reviewed 25 criminal smuggling cases filed in Arizona over the past two months in which

TERMS OF THE TRADE

Pollo: Literally, chicken; the nickname smugglers use for migrants they are shepherding north

Pollero: Literally, chicken farmer; in this context, a smuggler

Coyote: Another term for smuggler

Guia: Foot guide

Piso: Also known as the “mafia fee,” the amount a cartel charges for crossing the border from its territory

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

migrants were held as witnesses — court documents usually provide the information — and found 17 had indications that smartphones were involved. That’s a rate of 68%.

The actual figure could be higher because Border Patrol agents filing other cases might not report smartphone use in court documents.

In about half of the Arizona cases, migrants were guided across the border and to rendezvous locations by smartphone.

Smugglers in several cases received real-time instructions or scouting reports. One smuggler said a text message gave a pin-drop location for his pickup. Another said he was communicating via WhatsApp with the smuggling coordinator throughout his trip. When agents got on his tail, he said, he was ordered not to pull over and to try to escape.

Smuggling organizations know the value — and the dangers — of the smartphone. Criminal case files are full of reports about foot guides, drivers

and boat captains who tossed, smashed or wiped data from their phones once they saw Border Patrol agents closing in.

When agents do get access to texts or apps, they can build better cases and often puncture smugglers’ stories and excuses.

Smartphones also are valuable to migrants.

“I’ve never met an immigrant who didn’t have a modern cellphone, a smartphone, that was fully plugged into the social media world and that gave them live-time intelligence information about where to go, when to go and how people upstream were doing,” said Todd Bensman, a national security fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies.

He said the most powerful lure is the collection of selfies their relatives, neighbors and friends text back home, advertising the ease of gaining a foothold in the U.S.

Smugglers have been using Facebook and Snapchat for years, but TikTok is relatively new, according to The Times’ database. Most major social media platforms have been used to recruit drivers or connect them with migrants.

Malik Jackson was nabbed in 2019 for smuggling after a citizen tipped off authorities. He said he responded to a Snapchat ad seeking drivers, according to court documents. He told agents the ad offered \$300 per person to smuggle Mexicans and \$600 per Chinese migrant.

Gequon Willis, nabbed at a highway checkpoint in California in 2019, said he saw a Snapchat video titled “Want to make some money?” He had been fired from his job and needed work, so he clicked through and someone

contacted him and gave him instructions.

He picked up two illegal immigrants and was to be paid \$1,000 per person.

WhatsApp is the most popular platform for smugglers, according to The Times’ database, followed by Facebook and Snapchat. WhatsApp is particularly useful once drivers are recruited. Smuggling organizers use the app to relay instructions, help connect drivers and migrants and make sure they get through checkpoints.

Connecting migrants with drivers, which used to be tricky in remote areas, is now as easy as messaging a GPS pin to the driver over one of the apps. Smuggling scouts can give step-by-step directions to help migrants on foot avoid checkpoints.

Drivers about to be caught are ordered to trash phones or erase data. Smuggling networks have been derailed by undeleted texts with stash house locations or names that can be used to build cases.

Trying to crack down

Customs and Border Protection said it is “aware of the use of social media” to connect with migrants and recruit operators.

The agency’s answer: public relations.

“CBP works in close coordination with its federal, local and international partner agencies, including local community leaders to message the inherent dangers to all would-be migrants thinking of crossing the border illegally, especially those using the services of smuggling organizations,” the agency told The Times.

Neither Telegram nor TikTok responded to questions about the platforms’ use in smuggling.

Snap, the company that runs Snapchat, also didn’t answer questions.

Facebook, which owns Instagram and WhatsApp along with its own platform, said it tries to ban illegal activity such as advertising for smuggling. The company pointed to an exchange between CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Rep. Buddy Carter, Georgia Republican, at a hearing this spring.

“That’s against our policies, and we’re taking a lot of steps to stop it,” Mr. Zuckerberg said.

Mr. Carter told The Times this month that whatever Facebook is doing, it’s “clearly not enough.”

“We are facing a crisis at the border, and Facebook’s products are contributing to it. More needs to be done by them faster,” he said. “Congress has a responsibility to provide oversight over these companies, and I will continue to press them until their products are no longer used for human smuggling at the border.”

Republicans on the House Homeland Security Committee have begun to probe TikTok’s use as a recruiting tool, particularly for the teenage audience that the app attracts.

Rep. John Katko of New York, the top Republican on the panel, said TikTok does have the power to flag and remove messages and can control which videos “go viral” and which clips are aimed at certain users.

“With such control, TikTok should be able to eradicate the

cartel activities outlined above from the platform,” the Republicans wrote.

Illegal activity is sometimes in plain sight for those who know where to look.

Rolando Lucio, nabbed at the Falfurrias, Texas, checkpoint in December, told agents he used a YouTube video to coach the three migrants he was carrying on how to act and what to say to agents. He got tripped up when he told the agent the two migrants were family members but couldn’t remember their names.

An agent dryly wondered whether a relative wouldn’t know his family’s names. Lucio then came clean, according to court documents.

He pleaded guilty and was sentenced this spring to 15 months in prison.

At times, social media accounts come back to bite the smugglers.

Edward Olivas, arrested at a Laredo, Texas, checkpoint in March, said he was a Lyft driver on a run from Laredo to San Antonio, albeit one booked outside of the app. He said he charged about \$100.

When agents looked through his phone — after getting his legal consent — they found messages confirming that he knew he was smuggling and expected to be paid \$2,000 to transport a Mexican woman through the checkpoint. He even checked to see whether her English was “decent.”

BUDGET

From page A1

money as necessary to cover its debt. Should the money supply trigger inflationary pressure, the government can mop up the excess dollars through higher taxation.

In other words, the concept of “spending too much” is antiquated.

Mr. Biden’s \$6 trillion budget proposal, on the heels of trillions of dollars in COVID-19 relief bills, seems to reflect MMT’s philosophy that the government does not need to put a brake on spending. The theory seems tailor-made for fulfilling a liberal wish list, but economists across the spectrum believe the school is rooted more in politics than economics. At some point, they warn, the old rules about printing money and inflation are sure to apply.

“There’s this fundamental tension between ‘this is a bold new world, the second coming of FDR or LBJ,’ and the fact they are looking only in the recent rearview mirror on inflation,” Mr. Goodspeed said.

Consciously or not, Washington seems to have embraced the idea that government spending binges are no cause for concern.

“There seems to be a presumption we could just get anything,” said Joel Griffith, an economy and taxation expert at the conservative Heritage Foundation. “Just in the past year, during COVID and since, we’ve seen an implementation of some of the ideas of MMT on a monumental level.”

Mr. Griffith pointed to the explosion in the federal deficit from

\$2.4 trillion in 2019 to \$5.1 trillion in the last quarter of 2020.

Yet Congress has gone on a series of bipartisan spending binges in the 21st century, and inflation has remained a lurking rather than pressing issue.

“There is a ‘boy who cried wolf’ negative aspect to all this,” said Scott Sumner, an economist at George Mason University’s libertarian Mercatus Center who opposes MMT but is not unduly alarmed that inflation will spike.

“People who have been warning about this or that might lose some credibility, and now the more dovish sorts have got the upper hand at the Fed.”

Mr. Sumner says he thinks several factors in addition to MMT have contributed to the spending frenzy that has gripped the Biden administration and took hold in the administrations of Presidents Obama and Trump, leaving the U.S. more than \$26 trillion in debt.

“There’s been a real change in the thinking about how much we have to worry about deficit spending,” Mr. Sumner said. “You could certainly tell a story of fiscal stimulus without MMT, and there is this perception now that we are comfortable with much bigger deficits.”

Indeed, the national debt grew robustly under President George W. Bush, and Democrats and Republicans in Congress have shown no appetite for curbing spending. Mr. Bush created a Cabinet-level agency — the Department of Homeland Security — and added \$5.85 trillion to the national debt. Mr. Obama then blew it out with \$8.59 trillion more.

Bipartisan blowout Under Modern Monetary

Theory, those enormous spurts in spending are no problem. Low inflation rates in the past decade have played into MMT proponents’ hands, economists said.

The “quantitative easing” used to counter the Great Recession from December 2007 to June 2009, followed by trillions of dollars in COVID-19 relief bills in the Trump and Biden administrations, seem to lend credence to MMT’s laissez-faire philosophy on the government’s checkbook.

Biden administration officials did not respond to questions about how big a role MMT has played in the administration’s economic thinking and to what extent Mr. Biden ascribes to the theory.

MMT proponents have circled the president. One of the school’s most influential members, Stephanie Kelton, a professor at Stony Brook University in New York, was a longtime economic adviser to Sen. Bernard Sanders, a democratic socialist from Vermont, and became a key member of what the combined Biden and Sanders presidential campaigns called the “Economy Unity Task Force.”

In that role, Ms. Kelton was asked to “identify ways to transform our country,” according to her webpage.

Ms. Kelton did not respond to questions from The Washington Times.

Another high priest of MMT, Bard College professor L. Randall Wray, confirmed that he and other MMT economists have been working closely with lawmakers in Washington.

“MMT has definitely influenced the Dem side of the budget committee as well as some others,” Mr. Wray said. “I recently

gave a presentation to the [Congressional Budget Office], and I think Stephanie Kelton did too, or is set to do one — by invitation, so they are at least interested.”

Mr. Wray said it made sense for lawmakers to embrace MMT because its tenets are not hypothetical.

“MMT is not chiefly a theory; it is a description of reality,” he said. “Sort of like evolution versus creationism. We do have some policy prescriptions, but most of our work is simply describing the way sovereign government spends. The ‘creationists’ — deficit hawks and doves — are describing a world that does not exist.”

Ms. Kelton has pushed MMT as a viable concept for Washington. She wrote that “Biden could go bigger and not ‘pay for it’ the old way,” and other pieces.

Her idea that unrestrained federal spending can be modulated by ratcheting up taxes, if necessary, also has been embraced by far-left members of Congress such as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a New York Democrat who says MMT is the ticket to a Green New Deal and other enormous projects.

MMT has lurked among academic economists for some 40 years. American economist Warren Mosler is generally regarded as its father. Still, most economists across the spectrum remain unconvinced.

Although MMT can be found in some textbooks, it remains a fringe notion that some scholars find intellectually ham-handed. Even Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman, a supporter of more spending, has labeled MMT “Calvinball,” a reference

to the comic strip “Calvin and Hobbes.” The characters sometimes played a game in which they made up beneficial rules as they went along.

A relatively novel ivory tower theory with shifting principles should not leave Americans comfortable with ever-increasing debt, even if it has proved appealing to both sides of the aisle in Washington, many economists say.

“There needs to be a very stern warning sent to Republicans and Democrats that if you’re going to dramatically grow the size of government by printing money to buy government debt or spend it, you are simply going to run the risk of higher inflation,” Mr. Griffith said. “This is not a new thing. They’ve just given it a new name. And there’s no doubt these theories have worked their way into this administration.”

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EXECUTIONERS: Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, along with fellow Republicans, said the Democrats' sweeping bill to overhaul the nation's election system and voting rights was "a transparently partisan plan to tilt every election in America permanently in their favor."

SENATE

Republicans kill rewrite of election laws

Democrats' partisan initiative meets demise with filibuster

By **KERY MURAKAMI**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Democrats' sweeping attempt to overhaul the nation's election system fell to a whimpering defeat Tuesday, dealing President Biden his first major legislative loss.

While the immediate cause of death was a Republican-led filibuster, the legislation, which sprawled across more than 800 pages of text and would have overridden state election laws across the country, collapsed under the weight of its own liberal tilt.

All 50 Republicans voted to derail the bill, leaving it 10 votes shy of the 60 needed to overcome the filibuster.

Democrats labeled the bill

the "For the People Act," but the strictly partisan debate belied that ambitious name. Each party accused the other of trying to rig elections in their favor.

Democratic leaders promised liberal activists a concrete chance to rebuke former President Donald Trump for his unproven claims that the election last year was "stolen" from him.

Party leaders also billed it as a way to overturn election laws adopted this year in Republican-led states. Critics said the laws would make it harder for minorities to vote, hurting the chances of Democratic candidates.

The bill's demise was a devastating loss for the left.

"Voter suppression has

» see **ELECTION** | A5



DEFIANT: Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer vowed after the vote Tuesday that Democrats will continue to try to undo voting laws enacted by states. "We will not let it go. We will not let it die," he said.

UKRAINE

Russian 'passport' crosses a line in conflict

By **ALEXANDER KHREBET**
SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

AVDIIVKA, UKRAINE | Tensions on the border with Ukraine are already sky-high, but analysts and locals say Russia has embraced a potent new strategy in its efforts to destabilize and potentially absorb a chunk of its neighbor — by turning locals into Russian nationals.

It's not clear how many

Kremlin tries to win Ukrainians

passports Russia has issued to Ukrainian nationals in Donbass, as Ukraine's restive and culturally divided eastern region is called locally. But locals and analysts estimate that nearly a half-million Ukrainians have received — some against their will — the small red-dish diplomatic booklet adorned with a two-headed eagle and the

words "Russian Federation."

Stanislav Aseev, 31, an analyst with the Ukrainian Institute for the Future, a Kyiv-based think tank, said the pressure to become Russian is growing in the region as local authorities move to restrict the rights of non-Russian passport holders.

"In [the eastern town of]

Donetsk, they are going to pass a law which restricts property rights for those who only hold Ukrainian passports. These people will not be able to sell or buy housing in that territory," he said.

The grinding civil war in eastern Ukraine is one of the deadliest on the European continent. Russian-backed and Russian-speaking separatist forces have

» see **UKRAINE** | A5

IMMIGRATION

Dollars override danger: Inside a smuggler's mind

Naive Mexicans turn to illegal operations out of desperation

By **STEPHEN DINAN**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Last of a three parts

Life for Cecilio Rios-Quinones was always about money — and how little he had.

He started working at age 6, first on a farm near his home in Chihuahua, Mexico, and then in factories, where he earned as little as \$10 a day for at least a 12-hour shift. As his attorney told a federal judge, he never had any formal schooling, much less a high school diploma, so his options were scarce.

He and a brother, Ricardo, eventually headed north to Tijuana, where Rito, another brother, was involved with a smuggling organization. Rito's job was to guide migrants across the border into California.

On Feb. 9, 2020, Ricardo and

Cecilio tried to smuggle three women, the Santos sisters, but they got caught in a snap snowstorm in the mountains. The three women died, and Border Patrol agents made a dramatic rescue of the two men.

Ricardo and Cecilio were both sentenced this spring to 66 months in prison. Documents from their case provide a look into the psychology of a smuggler.

For men who had little money throughout their lives, smuggling seemed like an easy way to profit. They didn't see themselves as cogs in a multinational smuggling operation, but rather as poor farmers or laborers in need of money.

Smugglers talk about ailing parents or expanding families

» see **BORDER** | A9

MICHIGAN

Pandemic errors rally Republicans against Whitmer

Governor accused of hypocrisy

By **SETH McLAUGHLIN**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Tudor Dixon missed out on a final face-to-face goodbye with her grandmother, who died in a nursing home under strict Michigan rules for visitation.

Ms. Dixon now wants to take down the woman she blames: Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat whose handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has made her a top target for Republicans in elections next year.

"They didn't even open the blinds," Ms. Dixon told The Washington Times as she recalled standing outside the building where her grandmother was kept. "They just opened them so the slats were open, and I had to pick up my four daughters so they could try to see her through the window."

"Can you imagine a time in your life in the history of the United States that the governor says if your loved one is in the facility dying you are not allowed in?"



HOLDING ON: Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is popular among Democrats, but flouting her own restrictions isn't sitting well with some voters in the state.

Ms. Dixon, a co-host of the conservative TV news show "America's Voice Live," said other Michigan residents faced their own trials. Ms. Whitmer's

» see **MICHIGAN** | A5



POPULAR: Las Vegas Raiders defensive end Carl Nassib received outpouring of support after he came out as the NFL's first active, openly gay player.

NFL

Nassib's watershed moment for NFL years in making

By **MATTHEW PARAS**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Carl Nassib's social media video announcing to the world that he was gay took just 59 seconds. But the NFL player's decision to come out, making him the league's first active, openly gay player — well, that was years in the making.

Before Nassib, there was Michael Sam — the former St. Louis Rams seventh-rounder who came out just before the 2014 draft, only to never

play a game in the NFL. Before Sam, there was Jason Collins — the former NBA center who came out a year earlier. The list of gay men who have acknowledged their sexuality while playing professional sports — team sports, especially — is short. But those trailblazers no doubt paved the way for Nassib to add his name to the roster on Monday.

Wade Davis, a former NFL cornerback who retired after a training camp stint with the then-Washington Redskins in 2003, came out as gay

nearly nine years later. He told The Washington Times that the increased visibility of gay people has helped plenty of others step forward.

"For Carl to invite the world in — this is not the first time that someone has engaged with someone who identifies as LGBT," said Mr. Davis, a former consultant to the NFL on gay rights. "You'd have to literally be in a bubble to say you don't know anyone who identifies as such. So I would say the shift is in the visibility."

"LGBT people [are] unafraid to

claim openly that they love themselves and that they're going to not live in silence and they're not going to believe the myth that we are less than," Mr. Davis said.

On Instagram, Nassib said he didn't come out to draw attention to himself, but rather because "representation and visibility are so important." The six-year NFL veteran wrote that he has agonized about coming out for 15 years but recently decided to do

» see **NFL** | A7

POLITICS

Trump 'disappointed' in court picks over Obamacare ruling. **A4**

NATION

Port delays, shipping shortages contribute to fireworks dearth. **A6**

WORLD

Austin supports major overhaul of military justice system. **A8**

METRO

District statehood faces long odds as bill works way through Senate. **A10**

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BORDER

From page A1

counting on them to make ends meet.

Virtually all of them say they had no forethought about the dangers to themselves or to those they were smuggling.

“We weren’t prepared for the storm, and I would have never participated in this if I would have known someone would end up hurt or dead,” Ricardo Rios-Quinones told the judge in his case.

It’s a refrain echoed by others whose smuggling ventures go catastrophically wrong.

“The truth of the matter is that I had no clue that this could happen,” Ivan Ramirez Guzman told the judge before he was sentenced for his role in smuggling drugs and migrants. One venture ended up with a capsized boat and the Coast Guard rushing to save 14 people from the waters off Mission Bay in San Diego.

Although smuggling deaths are rare, they have become more common during this year’s surge, with drownings, exposure to the elements and vehicle crashes during high-speed chases.

Some smugglers give agents speeches about the nobility of their job. They rip phrases from immigrant rights rallies such as “No human is illegal.”

Most of them say they just need the cash, and some offer sad stories about their circumstances.

Jesús Samanieo-Contreras told agents that the \$4,800 he was expecting for smuggling three people in Arizona would pay medical bills for his sick grandmother.

Some say they were forced into smuggling, but that defense usually appears to be false.

Sanjuanita Martinez, nabbed at a highway checkpoint near Laredo, Texas, in September, told agents that a man showed up at her home, snatched her 7-year-old son and flashed a gun. He told her to smuggle, or else, she said. Authorities investigating her story found that the boy was safe and living with Martinez’s sister in San Antonio.

At the time of her arrest, Martinez was on extended probation from a 2016 smuggling attempt using stolen birth certificates for two Mexican children. She had been in and out of prison and broken probation with positive drug tests.

Agents hear plenty of tales from smugglers looking for cash to feed a drug habit.

SNEAKY SMUGGLERS

Smuggling cartels are frequently compared to billion-dollar businesses, and nowhere is that comparison more apt than in the smugglers’ ability to innovate and adapt. They find holes in border security and ways to twist U.S. policy for their own purposes. Here are some examples of smugglers’ subterfuge:



Tow me over

Smugglers figured nobody would think to look inside a car that was being towed, and they were right.

They stuffed two Brazilian migrants into the trunk of a car, called for a tow truck and told the driver they wanted the car delivered to a location 40 miles north. The route took the truck through a Border Patrol checkpoint in Sarita, Texas. The driver breezed through the checkpoint but was back five minutes later. He realized his customers’ story sounded fishy.

Agents called for a detection dog, which sniffed out the two migrants. Each had paid \$20,000 to get to New York. The tow truck driver agreed to help with a sting operation, and agents nabbed the smugglers.



Clone wars

One popular tactic is to clone legitimate vehicles. Using fake FedEx vehicles is a favorite, but some smugglers have tried to use ambulances.

During construction of President Trump’s border wall, smugglers hit on a new idea: painting vehicles to look like they were part of the crew. Most drivers wore orange safety vests and hard hats to complete the disguise. The Washington Times tracked at least a dozen such cases from 2019 to the end of the Trump administration.



Free ride

In one of the more ingenious tactics, Javier Ayala-Osuna, whom agents identified as a foot guide whose job was to lead migrants over the border and on a daylong walk deep into the U.S., figured out a way to return to Mexico without having to hoof it all the way. He turned himself in.

Under the pandemic emergency, most illegal immigrants caught at the border are expelled immediately as long as they don’t have more serious involvement. Authorities say Mr. Ayala figured out that he would look like an illegal immigrant and would be sent back quickly, at taxpayer expense. Back in Mexico, he would be ready to pick up the next load of migrants.

Source: The Washington Times, based on criminal case files in federal court

David Garcia-Nino, arrested in February 2020 while acting as foot guide for a group of nine migrants in El Cenizo, Texas, told agents he was smuggling to support his drug habit. He said he had been a guide since he was 10. He said he smuggled 20 groups in the previous month and earned \$100 per person.

Last month, agents snared a truck with 54 illegal immigrants. The driver, Rafael Cazarez Jr., a member of the Mexican Mafia gang, told agents he was an unemployed heroin user but collected \$50,000 for each smuggling run. This was his eighth time.

The Homeland Security Department announced Operation Sentinel in late April to target smugglers. The State Department, the FBI and the Drug Enforcement Administration also are involved in the effort to identify smugglers, move to strip their travel visas and freeze their U.S. assets.

“We know who you are, and we are coming for you. We will take everything

we can from you,” said Troy Miller, the acting commissioner at Customs and Border Protection, the agency leading the initiative.

Neither Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas nor Mr. Miller mentioned another option: bringing more criminal charges.

In case after case reviewed by The Washington Times, those arrested in the U.S. on smuggling charges are repeat offenders and are often given a break the first or second time.

Border Patrol agents in Texas stopped Haley Yvonne Garrett on April 15 and found six illegal immigrants in the Dodge Ram pickup she was driving. They seized the vehicle but released Ms. Garrett “due to lack of evidence,” according to an incident report.

Six days later, a state trooper tried to stop Ms. Garrett, but authorities said she fled and smashed her vehicle into a ranch fence. She and 11 illegal immigrants were arrested, but federal authorities again

did not prosecute. Texas charged Ms. Garrett instead and seized the Chevrolet Silverado pickup.

Authorities said they nabbed Ms. Garrett again last month after another crash, again with 11 illegal immigrants. Federal officials again left prosecution to local officials.

The decision to prosecute rests with U.S. attorneys.

Brandon Judd, president of the National Border Patrol Council, said prosecutions usually dip during Democratic administrations, but the decline seems to be even sharper under President Biden.

“They’re just refusing, and they don’t give us reasons why,” he said.

Texas is filling the gap with state charges in some instances. Arizona could file smuggling charges, but agents in the state are blocked from reaching out to sheriffs’ offices to report potential cases, Mr. Judd said.

“If U.S. attorneys decline prosecution, we’re not allowed to contact the local sheriff’s office,” he said.

Prosecution often comes as a shock.

Ashley Jasmin Martinez, nabbed for smuggling in February but released, was arrested again on April 18 by agents at the Falfurrias highway checkpoint in Texas. Agents said she resisted, was hit with a stun gun and still managed to drive away with shredded tires. She reached 100 miles per hour before her tires disintegrated and she careened to a halt.

She told agents: “Y’all are just going to let me go in five hours like last time, anyway, so why are you wasting my time?”

Lia Zanotti, arrested last month at a highway checkpoint in California with two illegal immigrants in her car, seemed more worried about her bosses at the smuggling organization. According to court documents, she told agents she was making the trip to pay off her debt from a week earlier, when she was caught carrying four people. She had to pay back the organization the \$40,000 it lost when the migrants were arrested.

She said she now owed another \$20,000 for losing two more migrants.

Cecilio and Ricardo Rios-Quinones were operating on a much smaller pay scale last year when they smuggled the three sisters into the jaws of the snowstorm in the La Posta Mountains east of San Diego.

Each of the women paid about \$8,500 for their trip, but Ricardo said he was getting just 18,000 pesos — about \$900 — to guide the three.

The attempt was fraught with

challenges from the start. The brothers speak Tepehuan, but the sisters spoke a Mixtec dialect. They dressed in light jackets for what they figured would be an easy route. None of the five was from the area and had no way of knowing what lay ahead, they told the judge.

They huddled behind a rock when the snowstorm struck, but it became clear that the sisters were rapidly deteriorating. Perhaps more important to the brothers, so was Cecilio.

The brothers left the women to get cellphone service for a 911 call, but they first called their smuggling handlers.

When they did reach 911, the brothers suggested that they were also migrants who had been abandoned. They also lied when they said all three women were still breathing. One of the sisters already had died, prosecutors said.

Pleading for leniency, the brothers saw plenty of wrong turns in their rear view.

“Should he have called 9-1-1 sooner rather than huddle up all together behind a rock? Yes. Should Mr. Rios-Quinones have known to skip a call to the boss before dialing 9-1-1? Yes. Should Mr. Rios-Quinones have insisted that everyone be given appropriate clothing and shoes before beginning the arduous trek traveled before by the women and his brother? Yes,” wrote Michelle Betancourt, his court-appointed attorney. “Should he have refused to leave that night because it was already raining? Maybe. It is hard to know whether a call 30 minutes earlier, 20 minutes or 10 minutes earlier would have saved the lives of these poor sisters.

“The sad truth is that Mr. Rios-Quinones will forever live with the guilt of having been part of a criminal act that killed three women. Even if his stoic personality did not outwardly show remorse when he was rescued, Mr. Rios-Quinones regrets the tremendous loss his actions caused the Santos family.”

U.S. District Judge Cathy Ann Bencivengo said the brothers needed to answer for the three deaths.

“It is tragic that someone wants to come here to work and dies, but it is more tragic that there are people who benefit from this, who treat them like cargo,” she said in slapping the sentences of 5½ years on each brother.

The third brother, Rito, who persuaded Cecilio and Ricardo to come to Tijuana in the first place, was nabbed by Border Patrol agents late last year.

He has pleaded guilty and is awaiting sentencing this month.

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