

Opinion: Wanting to avoid that one bad guest

By Scott Ramirez

On Tuesday I drove through South Lake Tahoe and counted “no vacancy” signs. I only saw one. You might think this is not a big deal until you realize that it was July 3 and our town is full.

Understanding that this is far from an accurate accounting of the state of our motel Industry, it is a departure from what I remember in past years, before the internet turned weekend rentals into a VHR invasion. In past years the “no vacancy” sign was an indicator of how full our town was, but those days are vanishing under the draw of easy homes to rent for a few nights stay. It is no wonder our motels have not been kept current given their business has been redirected to VHRs.

It is no wonder that VHRs are hugely popular considering a family can stay together, park together come and go as they please and not be bothered by strangers in the next room. They can order up a house and move in for the weekend with the click of a mouse. Few would question the popularity and draw this has for our town. The question remains, is this what we want for our neighborhoods? Is there no space left for families to live full time at Tahoe and not be inundated by a new batch of guests every weekend? Nearly every block within city limits has at least one if not more VHRs in their midst. If you listen to a scanner on any busy night, you can hear the calls for VHR complaints that pop up all over town.

My family has been lucky, most of the guests that stay across the street from us have been pleasant and interesting to meet. The owner is friendly and has reached out to mitigate problems and the huge house will likely increase the implied value of

my own home. It all sounds great until you get one bad guest. One bad guest means it is up to me to count people staying the night, up to me to count cars parking and up to me to listen for bumps in the night. If there is a problem, it is up to me to report it to the police and hope there is no retribution from the one bad guest who I just reported and will soon return to their own home. After your first bad guest, your home is never the same. You are left with the question of whether the next will repeat this whole process and you are once again confronted by that one bad guest.

VHRs do bring business to town and they do create revenue. The question remains whether the tourists who are the bread and butter of our town will return to stay in a smaller selection of VHRs and once more fill our motels as they have in past years. What the VHR industry is failing to admit is that a reduced number of rooms will result in higher room rates. Higher room rates will result in more room taxes being collected. There is a chance the city could see higher income generated by reducing the number of VHRs, assuming our guests return and fill the motels as they have in past years. This is the same reason SnowGlobe is so popular with our local businesses, funneling 20,000 additional guests on an already busy weekend causes room rates to go up because rooms become scarce (a reduced supply with increased demand means more profits). The same is true of VHRs, reduce the number available and the rates for the remaining rooms will increase. I am sure those running VHRs will insist their guests will not return to stay in motels, but history suggests this is not accurate.

The Tahoe Neighborhoods Group has a ballot measure to restrict VHRs to the established tourist core. This would phase in over a three-year period to allow VHR owners outside the tourist core the chance to decide what to do with their second homes. It is a fair minded approach to returning our neighborhoods to be residential areas and not an extension of the long

established tourist core. Please take the time to read this initiative and consider voting for it. You will likely hear that this measure will cause all sorts of mayhem for our city but remember, this is not a simple issue and those that say they know for certain what will happen are not being truthful. None of us knows for certain that reducing the number of VHRs will simply reduce the number of people visiting or cause our motels to fill again and rates for rooms go up. The city will pay for a survey and the VHR companies will cite past TOT numbers but neither can answer the question of how our guests will react. The only thing we do know is that our neighborhoods are being invaded. My neighborhood is no place for one bad guest.

Scott Ramirez is a resident of South Lake Tahoe.

Opinion: New threats to El Dorado County

By Larry Weitzman

Sinister forces are attempting to “take over” El Dorado County. County government is the county’s largest employer and county employees on average are some of the highest paid employees in the county with a total payroll of \$177 million and total employees of 2,151 for 2016, the last year reported by state auditors.

That employee number is inflated by new hires, retirees and part-timers making the average salary for total FTEs (full time employees of which there about 1,850) approaching \$96,000 annually. Our county government is the largest employer in the county and one of the best paying employers as well. Dozens of

county employees earn over \$200,000 annually and hundreds earn over \$100,000 a year. With the power to hire and fire department heads and the CAO, being a member of the EDC Board of Supervisors is a very powerful job.



Larry Weitzman

At the June 26 Board of Supervisors meeting, items were considered to change EDC's Charter to do several things, two of which are extremely important. The first being removing term limits for members of the Board of Supervisors and in the alternative, allowing a member of the Board of Supervisors three consecutive terms or 12 straight years of power. Currently EDC has a term limit of two terms or eight years for political offices, similar to the president of the United States and for most of the political offices the state of California.

The other significant change to the El Dorado County Charter strikes right at the heart of the Charter (and its voters) and that is to make the current elected department heads appointed instead of elected by the citizens of the county. That would be a massive usurpation of power from the people to the Board of Supervisors. One of the main reasons for EDC becoming a charter county is for the election of certain department heads beyond general law counties which only allow for the election of the sheriff, district attorney and (tax) assessor. While there are only 14 of 58 counties in California have their own charter (ours was voted in by the people in 1994), about 75 percent of the state's population live in those 14 charter counties.

In El Dorado County, the charter provides that the tax collector/treasurer, the auditor/controller, the county recorder/clerk and the county surveyor are elected in addition to the sheriff, DA and the assessor. The purpose is to give the voters the power to hire and fire those elected department heads and to keep them independent from the Board of Supervisors. It is for the same reason we use independent auditors for public corporations. Auditors should never be owned by the folks they are auditing. The reasons are obvious and as to a public entity, EDC would certainly qualify as one, although some people in the county think our government is closed off to them.

As part of the board meeting the board will take up the issue of making these currently elected department heads appointed by the board. What a power grab that would be by the board from the voters in a two-prong attack, the first being to lengthen their terms to indefinite or at least 12 years and the second would be the power to appoint what are currently independently voter elected department heads, department heads that currently give voters a certain balance of power.

In describing a "benefit" of the idea of appointed department heads was a quote from page 19 of the "Summary Report to the Board of Supervisors" as follows "appointed positions require a rigorous process of recruiting and vetting applicants to ensure that the best possible appointment is made, whereas elected officials only need meet minimum education and/or certification qualifications."

This should be correctly called the "spoils system" a term derived from what New York Sen. William Marcy said of Andrew Jackson's 1828 election when he said, "To the victor go the spoils." Marcy (actually said "to the victor belong the spoils") was referring to the benefits and fruits of winning an election or military battle. The spoils system was the appointment power, i.e. judges and the bureaucracy (department heads in EDC's case). Federal and state system appointments

many times comes down to appointing of your friends and campaign donors, certainly people who agree with you. Rigorous vetting and qualifications? Yeah, sure.

Enlarging this spoils system for the appointment of our county auditor or treasurer (who makes the investment of county funds) would be a terrible decision. Those are positions that need to be picked by the ultimate arbiter, the citizens.

Both these potential charter changes would be disastrous and expensive for El Dorado County. The selection process would not be rigorous but would be part of an expanded spoils system. The auditor/controller is the county watchdog, the only individual that could be considered an independent "inspector general" of sorts. It is the one office that must always remain independent from the Board of Supervisors (and the bureaucracy) and never be beholden to the board.

Now for the latest news. As this column was written before the Board voted on these proposals of disenfranchising the voters, the Board of Supervisors has voted 5-0 in an attempt to grow their power, to place both proposals on the ballot (which is the only way to amend the county Charter), asking voters to:

1. allow the members of the board to have three consecutive terms thereby reducing the effectiveness of terms limits and
2. Remove from the voter's ability to elect the offices of auditor/controller, tax collector/treasurer, surveyor and the reorder/clerk. It will be a definitely blow to our already limited democracy and cause a huge expansion of the bureaucracy and cost taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars in higher salaries. Supervisors Mike Ranalli and Sue Novasel, who are up for re-election this November, both voted to increase their power and fiefdoms with their vote for placing these matters on the ballot. Remember this dastardly deed on both of them when voting next November. As Lord Acton said, "Power corrupts and absolutely power corrupts absolutely." This quote now applies to every member of the EDC Board of Supervisors.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.

Editorial: Maybe it's time to ban fireworks

Publisher's note: *This editorial is from the July 2, 2018, Sacramento Bee.*

It has become a kind of July tradition: Counting the ways in which California's fire season is now more dangerous.

Every summer around this time, the red flags grow redder: the dry air, the triple-digit heat, the dying trees in the wilderness, the chaparral rattling in the foothills. Every summer around this time, some fiery apocalypse erupts somewhere in the state as if to drive home the message.

It's time to align California's laws with the modern costs and benefits of celebrations that involve explosives. If we can't bring ourselves to ban fireworks entirely during our now nearly year-round fire season, we should at least outlaw them during red-flag conditions.

Read the whole story

Opinion: LTN owner says

goodbye

By Kathryn Reed

Saying goodbye is never easy, but that's exactly what I'm doing.

After nine years of owning/operating *Lake Tahoe News*, it is time to move on. This will be the last month of the news site (unless it sells – **here is the listing**).

The coverage will be sporadic until the end of the month.

LTN started on Labor Day 2009 with the Jaycee Lee Dugard parade. What an introduction.

Every day since then we have been providing a variety of news. We have broken a slew of stories, often being the only publication to write about a topic. We weren't afraid to upset people, even advertisers. We were never bought by anyone. For our travel pieces we won multiple awards.

I'm proud to say we never charged for an obituary. We were innovative in how we eliminated the trolls by creating a policy to charge for comments – something I wish we'd done sooner. The nights when we picked who to endorse in the various political races were some of the best political discussions I've been involved in. Thank you to everyone who volunteered to be part of that important endeavor. The various series we did from the five-year anniversary of the 2007 Angora Fire, to South Lake Tahoe turning 50, to mental health, to looking at affordable housing in 2017 were accomplishments that everyone who was involved in them can look back on with pride. That is what true journalism is about.

So many of the stories we wrote were ideas provided by readers. You were wonderful sources. Some sent in tips, photos, asked about something that led to a story. It really

was a group effort in so many ways.

It hasn't just been hard news. We published incredible feature stories on people, places and organizations – with more to come this month. We tried to provide a mix of stories, to be a community newspaper – just online. I believe we achieved that goal.

I started *Lake Tahoe News* because I was frustrated with all the news I knew was not getting published and couldn't imagine what I didn't know that should see the light of day. This is an incredibly rich area for news. I was never at a loss for something to cover; just disappointed not to be able to get to everything. Before *LTN* I had been freelancing for publications like the *Tahoe Mountain News*, *New York Times*, *Reuters* and *Sacramento Business Journal*. This was after being fired as managing editor of the *Tahoe Daily Tribune* because I wouldn't blur the lines between advertising and editorial. I came to Tahoe from San Francisco where I had been an editor at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The *Trib* was where I started my journalism career as a reporter out of college.

There are so many people who have made *Lake Tahoe News* what it is. If it weren't for you readers, it wouldn't matter what we do every day. You have kept me going on days when I was ready to chuck the computer out the window. You made me realize what we were doing was worth it, that it was important, that we were making a difference.

And while all of that is still true, it is time for me to move on, to explore new challenges, pursue new dreams. I've been in the news business since graduating from college 30 years ago; even before that if you count high school and college papers as well as summer internships. The grind, especially these last nine years of working every day, has me wanting and needing to take a break.

I know it's always dangerous to start naming people because

inevitably someone will be left out, but here goes. Sue Wood – thank you for being with *LTN* from the first story and to the end with more coming this month. Your words, counsel and support have been invaluable. Lisa Tolda was also there on Day 1, shooting the parade, and has been a stalwart supporter of true journalism; Kim Wyatt for endless conversations, being my go-to sounding board who talked me off the ledge so many times; Carolyn Wright for making me understand copyright law and upping the level of photography to a professionalism that is off the charts; Dave Gill for being my IT guru who saved me when the site had some serious technical troubles and who will be there until the end and beyond; Joann Eisenbrandt puts more time and research into a story compared to anyone I know; Jessie Marchesseau, Linda Conaboy and Terra Breeden who are still writing for *LTN* – covering a diverse lineup of stories that shows their range; Karen Kuentz who unfailingly provides the weekly pet of the week even when out of town; Anne Knowles was there early on, covering mostly Douglas County issues before getting a full-time job elsewhere; Kat Hill who covered the North Shore before buying her own publication; Pat Banner who from Washington state reads *LTN* after the fact for typos and other corrections; Lisa Huard for your stint at selling ads; Denise Haerr for taking photos when I couldn't and providing so much cultural content; and the writing and photo interns who also taught me, with one being responsible for getting *LTN* on Instagram. I could go on and on about each person; they all deserve their own story about what they mean to me and the impact they've had on *Lake Tahoe News*.

I am so grateful to *LTN's* advertisers. South Tahoe Refuse, Sierra-at-Tahoe, Lake Tahoe Community College, Barton Health and the city of South Lake Tahoe took a chance on *Lake Tahoe News* in 2009 when none of us was really sure what the news site was going to be. They have continued to support *LTN* to this day. There were plenty of other advertisers through the years – thank you.

And thank you to the many individuals who donated to *LTN*, especially to those who did so with commenting not being the reason to do so. Your support of community journalism is admirable.

While I move on, I hope the void created by *Lake Tahoe News*' absence won't last long. There needs to be a watch dog. Without an informed citizenry, we all lose. Public agencies need to be held accountable. The public should demand accurate, unbiased news coverage – not merely settling for press releases being regurgitated or stories that favor chamber-backed businesses. It takes time, work and money to put out a publication. Support the media you read by buying an ad or telling an advertiser you saw their ad. When you see that donate button, don't ignore it; subscribe to publications, don't just read the allotted number of free articles and move on until the next month.

I leave being proud of what I created with *Lake Tahoe News*. We made a difference. Thank you for being part of this incredible journey.

Kae

Opinion: Mexico's next president likely to defy Trump

By Luis Gómez Romero, The Conversation

President Trump has long blamed Mexico for the flow of Central Americans seeking to enter the United States' southern border.

Migrants just cross Mexico like they're "walking through Central Park," Trump once claimed.

In truth, Mexico is aggressive in enforcing U.S. immigration policy. In 2014 President Enrique Peña Nieto implemented a robust deterrence effort, the Southern Border Program, to deter migration across Mexico's border with Guatemala.

Between 2014 and 2015, Mexican deportations of Central Americans traveling to the U.S. – primarily Guatemalans, Hondurans and Salvadorans – more than doubled, from 78,733 in 2013 to 176,726 in 2015. During the same period, U.S. border agents detained half as many Central American migrants at the border.

That compliant attitude is about to change. Mexicans elect their next president – and 18,000 other elected officials, from mayors all the way up to senators – on Sunday, July 1. It is the biggest and most expensive election in Mexico's history. And Trump's draconian new immigration policies, which include detaining children and criminally prosecuting migrants, have taken center stage in the presidential race.

Mexico's four presidential candidates argue over many issues, from corruption to the economy. But they all agree on this: Mexico can no longer maintain its policy of helping enforce U.S. immigration laws.

Nobody's piñata

Presidential front-runner Andrés Manuel López Obrador is an outspoken Trump critic who recently denounced separating migrant families as "arrogant, racist and inhuman."

He is widely expected to win on Sunday. The 64-year-old leftist has led the four-way race for months and currently has 49 percent of voter support, according to the latest polls.

López Obrador launched his presidential bid on April 1 with a

rally in Ciudad Juárez, the northern Mexico city where thousands of migrants cross into the U.S. each year. In a fiery speech, López Obrador promised that, with him as president, Mexico would reassert itself as a “free, sovereign and independent” nation and would not be the “piñata” of any foreign power.

An early critic of President Peña Nieto’s Southern Border Program, López Obrador has accused the Mexican government of committing human rights violations in its persecution and deportations of Central American migrants.

On his watch, Mexico would still “pay special attention” to its southern border, López Obrador says, but it would no longer do Trump’s “dirty work.” López Obrador wants Mexico to respect existing laws that protect the human rights of migrants and guarantee that asylum-seekers can find refuge in its borders.

Ricardo Anaya, the right-of-center second-place candidate, has also attacked Nieto’s policy of detaining and deporting Central American migrants. Anaya says his country must be a “moral authority” on immigration, treating Central Americans in Mexico as justly and humanely as Mexican immigrants would like to be treated in the U.S.

The changing face of migration

Illegal immigration to the U.S. has changed radically over the past two decades.

The number of Mexicans apprehended crossing illegally has plummeted, from more than 1.6 million in 2000 to 130,000 last year.

Central Americans, driven by endemic violence and pervasive poverty, now make up a bulk of all people caught trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. In 2017, U.S. Border Patrol agents there arrested 303,916 migrants. Just over half of them

– 162,891 people – were from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Mexico has thus become a major transit country for migrants.

It is also, increasingly, their final destination. Mexico saw 12,700 asylum requests from Central American refugees, up from 8,800 in 2016 and 3,400 in 2015. Only the U.S. received more Central American asylum-seekers, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency.

Rather than welcome Central Americans, Nieto's administration in 2014 accepted \$90 million of American funding to better secure its borders. His government has ruthlessly persecuted migrants who journey through the country.

Mexico detained 40,920 Central American migrants between January and April 2018 alone. Nearly 35,000 were deported.

In 2016, the Obama administration recognized Mexico for "absorbing" so many Central American migrants. Trump has expressed no such gratitude.

The high cost of appeasing Trump

In 2016, Peña Nieto's advisers invited both U.S. presidential candidates to visit Mexico.

Clinton declined the invitation. Trump, whose 2016 campaign was fueled by promises to build a "big, fat, beautiful" border wall, accepted.

In a joint press conference on Aug. 31, 2016, Peña Nieto emphasized his country's contribution to U.S. immigration enforcement. The border, Peña Nieto said, represents a "shared challenge" and a "great humanitarian crisis."

Trump was subdued at that event. But he ridiculed the Mexican president at a campaign rally later the same day, insisting that Mexico would indeed pay for a border wall.

“They don’t know it yet,” he told supporters in Phoenix, “but they’re going to pay for it.”

Peña Nieto never recovered from this diplomatic disaster. According to the newspaper El Universal, 88 percent of Mexican citizens were offended by Trump’s visit – and by Peña Nieto’s polite, submissive behavior. The Mexican president’s approval rating plunged to below 25 percent and never bounced back.

His party has paid the price. José Antonio Meade, the presidential candidate for Peña Nieto’s Revolutionary Institutional Party, has been stuck in third place throughout the 2018 election season.

Another Mexican revolution

López Obrador, a savvy career politician, has benefited from Peña Nieto’s mistake.

Even the choice of location for his campaign launch, Ciudad Juárez, sent a powerful message that López Obrador’s attitude toward Trump would not be one of deference.

Juárez is not just a border city – it’s a symbolic place in Mexican history. It was the bulwark where Mexico’s only indigenous president, Benito Juárez, in 1867 fought back a French invasion and re-established a sovereign Mexican government. Juárez was also home to key moments in the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910.

López Obrador closed his campaign on June 27, four days before the election as required by Mexican law. At a massive rally in Mexico City’s Azteca stadium, he promised 100,000 supporters that he would “transform” their country.

Like so many of López Obrador’s lofty campaign commitments, his immigration plan is short on details. But it’s clear Trump has already lost his power of intimidation south of the border – even if, to paraphrase his own verbal jab, he doesn’t know

it yet.

Luis Gómez Romero is a senior lecturer in human rights, constitutional law and legal theory, University of Wollongong.

Letter: Changing the lineup at SISLT

To the community,

The 60th installation of Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe Foundation officers combined a patriotic 4th of July theme and America's signature game, baseball, in a lighthearted ceremony at Harvey's convention center on June 27. It began with photographs of the club's 1964 fundraising baseball game between Soroptimist and Rotary of South Lake Tahoe, followed by clips from the legendary Abbott and Costello film "Who's on First." The tables were decorated with cups of peanuts and Cracker Jack; the installing officers in baseball shirts and hats.

New officers included pinch hitter, Lee Moisio (director), third base coach, Liz Palmer (director), Ccenter fielder, Hanna Bernard (delegate), left fielder, Jenn Lukins (delegate), right fielder, Vicki Gonzales (alternate delegate), short stop, Aletha Nelligan (treasurer), third base, Ellen Palazzo (recording secretary), second base, Cathy Donovan (corresponding secretary), first base, Annie Davidson (vice president), catcher, Liz Beispiel (president elect), pitcher, Pam Barrett (president) and umpire, Cheryl Chambers (parliamentarian).

This is Pam's second term as president following a highly

successful first term. In addition to a successful wine tasting, Pam took up the Regional Governor's philanthropic challenge to each club to provide 100 dresses to young girls in poor countries all over the world. Pam challenged her members to exceed the goal and they did – providing 207 handmade dresses. Each dress bears a small emblem indicating that the wearer is sponsored by a caring woman and is a warning to would be traffickers. The dresses are distributed by members as they travel around the world.

Linda Mendizabel, SISLT

Opinion: Colluding with California's Russian

By Joe Mathews

Take my guilty plea, Mr. Mueller. Because this Californian is colluding with a Russian.

Specifically, that most alluring of Russians, the Russian River, which seductively winds through Mendocino and Sonoma counties to the Pacific. Traveling the length of the Russian—as I recently did—reminds you that California and Russia are too intertwined for scandal to keep us apart.



Joe Mathews

Russian interference in California is older than the state itself. Our state's top industries, entertainment and technology, have been defined by Russian emigres from songwriter Irving Berlin to Google's Sergey Brin.

Then there is the mystical connection between California and Russia, two of this planet's greatest puzzles. Each territory is considered too vast, and its people too strange, to ever be truly understood. Winston Churchill famously called Russia "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma"; anyone familiar with California's governing system knows that those words apply to the Golden State too.

On my excursion, I stopped at Fort Ross, a Russian settlement established in 1812, an eventful year for invasions, with Britain attacking the United States, and the Russians repelling Napoleon—a victory so great that Tchaikovsky's overture about it is performed each summer at the Hollywood Bowl. The Russians' presence gave the river its name.

The Russian-American Company, which established Fort Ross, constructed the first windmill and first ship ever built in California. But like so many California arrivals, the Russians found the cost of living was high, and business ventures unprofitable. So in 1841 the Russians sold off Fort Ross, like a failed startup, to John Sutter, who had all the assets hauled to Sacramento.

Ever since, the cover story has been that the Russians abandoned California to Mexicans and then the Americans. But California actually made the fort larger and turned it into a state park. In recent decades, with tens of thousands of tourists visiting from the motherland, Fort Ross sees far more Russians than it ever did under Russian rule.

From Fort Ross, I drove back to the river in tiny Jenner. There, the Soviet Union's hammer-and-sickle flag flies over a restaurant, Russian House #1.

The restaurant's founders, Tatiana Ginzburg and Polina Krasikova, are Russians, who split time between Sonoma County and St. Petersburg. Ginzburg, a psychologist, explained that the restaurant is really "a space for dialogue between two great cultures and peoples."

It also challenges capitalist thinking. There is no menu, no prices, and no bill—you pay what you think is right, in a bowl by the door.

Ginzburg's work draws from the 20th century Russian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff, who taught that many humans are "asleep" and thus behave as unconscious automatons who are easily manipulated into thoughtless horrors, like world war. But through dedicated work, humans can ascend to a higher state of consciousness and become more fully human.

Gurdjieff was a composer as well as a spiritual master, and the restaurant has a piano and a harp, and hosts events. It also contains puzzles of various kinds. The word for puzzle in Russian is "Golovolomka," she noted, "which means something that will break your head.

"Our intention is to create a new type of being," she said, adding as she left for a rebirthing: "There is a connection here on the river, between Russia and this place."

After perusing the restaurant library, with titles from Le Carré to Dostoyevsky, I thought about connections as I continued my river trip. There is a magic in the scale of the Russian landscape or the giant trees of the Redwoods State Natural Reserve. The dachas there might be the large Wine Country estates here. And then there's the joy of carousing. Russia runs on vodka, and the Russian River on wine.

As I drove, the radio was full of reports on Russian interference in American democracy. The maddening news put me in mind of Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace," the massive Russian novel of that 1812 French invasion. "Those whom God wishes to

destroy he drives mad," Tolstoy wrote.

He also wrote about love and enemies: "Someone dear to one can be loved with human love; but an enemy can only be loved with divine love." When we see God in those we fight, Tolstoy explained, we achieve a love that, "nothing, not even death" can shatter.

I don't love authoritarians who attack democracy and innocent people. But Putin is not Russia, and America is not Trump. And at least I was questioning my consciousness, as the women at the Russian House #1 advise.

I don't know what I was thinking when I reached Healdsburg and walked to a beach beside the river. But for some reason I removed my shoes and waded into the Russian.

The water was warmer and deeper than I had expected.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.

Opinion: U.S. unfair to Central American refugees

By Susan Bibler Coutin

U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions' announcement on April 6 that all unauthorized border crossers will be federally prosecuted might sound like a reversal of U.S. policy. So might his June 11 decision that being a victim of domestic violence or gang violence generally will no longer be considered grounds for receiving asylum.

But, as someone who has been analyzing asylum since the 1980s, I look at these announcements and see continuity. Sessions' policies fit a pattern, going back decades, of excluding asylum seekers from Central America from the human rights protections afforded by U.S. and international law.

Central America should not be singled out in this way. After all, asylum law is supposed to be politically neutral. But the reality for decades has been anything but. Concerns about admitting asylees from Central American countries that are close to us, and who are fleeing from regimes that the United States supports, have led to disparate outcomes for citizens of these nations.

Such exclusions began during the civil wars of the 1980s when Central Americans immigrated to the United States in increased numbers, fleeing political violence in their homelands. Because the United States supported repressive right-wing governments in El Salvador and Guatemala, accepting refugees from those countries threatened to undermine U.S. foreign policy.

In this process, politics trumped reality. Central American civil wars were actually fought over such issues as access to land, a more equitable distribution of resources, and political repression, but the United States saw these wars as part of a Cold War fight against communism. So, for example, the United States provided more than \$1 million a day in military and economic assistance to El Salvador, despite its government committing widespread human rights abuses, including massacres of peasants and death squad activity.

In 1984, less than 3 percent of the asylum claims filed by Salvadorans and Guatemalans were granted, in contrast to approval rates in the range of 32 to 60 percent for applicants from Poland, Afghanistan, and Iran. U.S. detention centers also used coercive practices to pressure Salvadorans and Guatemalans to agree to depart the country voluntarily instead

of filing asylum claims. Detainees generally were not informed of their right to apply for asylum, were threatened with lengthy detention, and were prevented from meeting with attorneys.

This discriminatory treatment gave rise to a community of advocates who, throughout the 1980s, pursued redress in the courts while also trying to sway public opinion. A class action suit, *Orantes Hernandez v. Meese*, resulted in a permanent injunction in 1988 preventing coercive tactics against detainees.

The process for Central Americans was so unfair that, beginning in the 1980s, religious congregations declared themselves to be "sanctuaries" for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees in order to draw attention to the need for asylum while also challenging U.S. aid to the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments. Following the conviction of two priests, a minister, a nun and four lay workers on alien-smuggling and conspiracy charges, religious groups and Central American community organizations sued the U.S. government, charging that asylum processes were discriminatory.

This case, known as *American Baptist Churches v. Thornburgh* or "ABC" was settled out of court, enabling these asylum seekers to file claims under rules designed to ensure fair consideration of their cases. At the same time, the 1990 Immigration Act created Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and designated Salvadorans as the first group to receive it.

By joining forces across political divides, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans were able to secure passage of the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA) in 1997. To do so, they, their allies, and Central American leaders argued successfully that the U.S. government had granted these immigrants temporary documentation, and that they should be exempted from immigration restrictions adopted in 1996. Importantly, NACARA provides a precedent for creating

a pathway to lawful permanent residency and eventually citizenship for TPS recipients.

During the post-war years, violence in Central American countries continued, but shifted from civil war to gangs and crime. The gang violence is the product of multiple factors: impunity granted to human rights abusers; an abundance of weapons; corruption; income inequality; the trauma of the war years; and the rise of drug cartels and U.S. deportation policies, which have sent U.S.-based gang members to Central American countries.

Central American families—particularly in the Northern triangle of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—experienced extreme insecurity including forcible gang recruitment, extortion, sexual violence, assault, and murder in the late 1990s and the 2000s. Yet, just as during the war years, the U.S. government is now arguing that the violence experienced by Central Americans is generally not grounds for political asylum. For example, in a 2008 Board of Immigration Appeals decision, three Salvadoran youth who had been beaten, harassed, and threatened with death and rape for refusing to join the MS-13 gang were denied asylum, despite widespread evidence of such abuses, including the shooting and killing of another youth in their neighborhood who had also refused to join.

While obtaining asylum remained restricted, immigrants living in the United States were increasingly treated as suspects, a process of criminalization that increased their risk of being deported. Immigration reforms adopted in 1996 expanded the range of criminal convictions that incurred immigration penalties, restricted avenues for immigrants to legalize their status, and made detention mandatory for many. Secure Communities, a program launched under President George W. Bush and expanded under President Barack Obama, increased collaboration between police, prisons, and immigration authorities, with the result that for noncitizens, coming into

contact with the criminal justice system could result in being deported from the United States.

Prosecution of immigration violations escalated to the point that these now comprise a significant portion of the federal docket. Individuals who had spent most of their lives in the United States and who may even have acquired lawful permanent residency were being removed permanently, resulting in devastating family separations. Latinos—particularly Mexicans and Central Americans—are disproportionately targeted in these enforcement practices.

The current administration's policies toward Central Americans extend this history of criminalization and of restricting access to asylum—by defining the violence that is part of everyday lives as outside the boundaries of U.S. protection. President Trump has repeatedly associated Central Americans with crime and gangs, referring to their homelands as “shithole countries,” and suggesting that all who enter the country without authorization might be MS-13. Such statements fly in the face of criminologists' findings that the foreign-born commit fewer crimes on average than do people born in the United States.

Other Trump actions revisit the past. The administration rescinded TPS, or temporary protections, that had been issued to Salvadorans and Hondurans following natural disasters, despite ongoing violence in Honduras and El Salvador. Sessions also reversed progress that had been made in making the legal case for domestic violence and gang violence as a basis for asylum. It's true that even before Sessions overruled these rationales, asylum cases based on such violence were very difficult to win, with 75 to 80 percent of such claims being denied. But one impact of Sessions' ruling is that many asylum seekers will not even pass the first hurdle for asylum seekers—interviews at which they must demonstrate credible fear—and therefore will be unable to submit their claims.

Likewise, even though family separations have garnered attention since the Trump administration adopted a zero tolerance policy on unauthorized border crossings, immigrant families have had to contend with separations of various sorts for decades, if not longer. When legalization opportunities were restricted by the 1996 reforms, immigrant parents were unable to acquire lawful permanent residency, which would have enabled them to petition for children who were left behind in their countries of origin to immigrate legally. Temporary statuses such as TPS do not confer the right to leave the United States and reenter without permission from the U.S. government, so TPS recipients have been unable to visit family members in their countries of origin for years. Deportees are often separated from family members in the United States, and are unable to return legally for visits. Such separations are not as dramatic as those that have currently captured public attention, but they are nonetheless devastating. When I have interviewed immigrants who are seeking legalization opportunities, interviewees have broken down in tears describing their inability to visit their parents on their deathbeds to say goodbye.

This history of exclusion has not prevented immigration. On the contrary, a study by the Pew Research Center found that between 2007 and 2015, the U.S. immigrant population from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras rose by 25 percent, at a time when the immigrant population from Mexico declined by 6 percent. Perhaps this is because immigration is driven less by U.S. policies than by conditions in immigrants' countries of origin. If so, what is being accomplished by exclusionary policies?

Ending the repeated exclusion of Central American asylum seekers would require bringing asylum policies into alignment with the forms of violence that actually occur in the communities these individuals are fleeing. Then, protections must be zealously enforced, for example, by creating

meaningful opportunities for individuals to apply for asylum, providing those who pass credible “fear interviews” with temporary permission to remain in the country instead of placing them in detention, allowing parents and children to remain together; in short, caring for victims of persecution instead of punishing them. Doing so would promote family integrity, support human rights, and alter the dynamics of the historic relationship between the United States and Central American nations.

Susan Bibler Coutin is professor of criminology, law and society and anthropology at UC Irvine. Her most recent book, “Exiled Home: Salvadoran Transnational Youth in the Aftermath of Violence,” was published in 2016.

Letter: Community member hosts B&B dinner

To the community,

In honor of her hardworking and supportive parents, Janet McDougall hosted Bread & Broth’s Monday Meal on June 18. Janet has been sponsoring Adopt A Day of Nourishments for several years and B&B truly appreciates her dedication to B&B’s program and her devotion to helping the community.

“It’s always a privilege to work with the wonderful volunteers at Bread & Broth, and to serve our community in such a meaningful way,” commented Janet. With Janet’s donation, B&B fed 105 dinner guests sloppy Joes, coleslaw, potato salad, a beautiful fresh fruit salad and a variety of desserts. “Good food, good people and smiles on so many faces,” was Janet’s observation of the evening meal event. All of this was made

possible by Janet's generosity, many dedicated B&B volunteers and Janet's sponsor crew members Flori Curran, Julie Kucinskas and Kathleen Maston.

Janet and her crew were so helpful during the meals setup wrapping utensils, packing food giveaway bags, serving the 105 dinner guests first and second servings and then ending their –three-hour shift with the meal's cleanup. This dedication to helping others is a reflection of the spirit of giving that our donors like Janet, her crew members and B&B volunteers embrace.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth

Opinion: Calif. can't sidestep federal tax impact

By Dan Walters, CALmatters

When President Trump signed an overhaul of the federal tax system six months ago, there was much complaining from politicians in California, New York and other high-taxing – and politically blue – states.

They particularly disliked a new \$10,000 limit on deductibility of state and local taxes because it would make their taxpayers, particularly the most affluent, feel the full financial effects of high state taxes.



Dan Walters

We're back to where we started when the federal tax law was changed, with upper-middle class and high-income Californians, those paying more than \$10,000 in previously deductible state income and local property taxes, facing higher federal tax bills.

They feared that those highly impacted taxpayers would find ways to reduce or eliminate their state tax liabilities since they could no longer write them off on federal tax returns, and that would cut into state revenue streams.

The potential impact would be especially heavy in California because of the state's lopsided dependence on its highest-income residents. The top 1 percent of California taxpayers account for nearly half of the state's income tax revenues and therefore about a third of its general fund budget.

Gov. Jerry Brown even worried aloud that faced with much-higher tax burdens, the state's wealthy would be tempted to move their official residences to low- or no-tax states such as neighboring Nevada.

California politicians saw it as a sneak attack by Republicans on blue states and vowed to counter it with some clever bookkeeping.

While deductibility of state and local taxes was being severely curtailed, they said, the tax overhaul left charitable contributions untouched so they could give taxpayers an option of making tax-deductible donations to the state in lieu of taxes.

We haven't heard much about that scheme of late, for good reason. Last month, the Internal Revenue Service issued a warning that "federal law controls the characterization of the payments for federal income tax purposes regardless of the characterization of the payments under state law."

Implicitly, in other words, were California or any other state to attempt the charitable contribution ploy, taxpayers who used it would be in danger not only of having their deductions denied, but of being slapped with penalties for trying it.

Call it a political checkmate.

So we're back to where we started when the federal tax law was changed, with upper-middle class and high-income Californians, those paying more than \$10,000 in previously deductible state income and local property taxes, facing higher federal tax bills.

And that means we're back to wondering whether a significant number of affluent Californians will feel moved to move.

Earlier this month, the Wall Street Journal reported that real estate professionals are seeing an uptick in inquiries from high-income clients about moving from high-tax states such as California and New York to those with low- or no income taxes, such as Florida and Nevada.

David Hutchinson, who developed the Clear Greek golf community on the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe, told the Journal, "Most of our lot sales are to buyers from California, the vast majority of whom intend to make them a permanent residence."

Someone earning \$3 million a year could move his or her personal domicile from San Francisco to Tahoe, Hutchinson said, and save \$399,000 a year in taxes, adding, "That's a lot of money to spend on real estate."

Anecdotal stories about tax refugees abound, and in fact, I

could cite several well-to-do retirees among my circle of acquaintances who've relocated from Sacramento to the Reno area for tax reasons.

So it's happening, but whether the tax relocations remain just anecdotes or develop into a green wave won't be known until after those higher taxes come due next year.

Dan Walters is a columnist at CALmatters.