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The Merry-Go-Round: Striking at the Roots of MS-13

Street gangs of today no longer belong to the "West Side Story"-like stereotype that Americans once envisioned in simpler times. The modern evolution of the gang as a social entity is one of increased violence, growing international networks, and ever-changing tactics. Today, the majority of gangs in the United States are foreign-born or minority-operated, as opposed to the organized crime of the 1930's and 40's, which was carried out mainly by naturalized citizens. One of the largest gangs threatening U.S. security today is MS-13, an abbreviation for "Mara Salvatrucha," meaning literally, "Salvadorian gang." The "13" refers to "m," the 13th letter of the alphabet. The alarming growth rate and brutal violence that first drew the attention of law enforcement in the late 90s has now shed light on much deeper-rooted problems: loosely tied, constantly evolving networks employing non-stop recruiting tactics all over the United States and Central America. To combat the spread of MS-13, House Resolution 2933 was introduced and passed in mid-June of last year in the House of Representatives. Better known as the Alien Gang Removal Act of 2005, if it were to become law, the bill would allow increased deportation of alien gang members convicted of committing or attempting to commit a gang crime, as well as bar U.S. entry of individuals known to be involved in gang- related crime or activity. The bill, though bold and forceful, will have reverse effects on both the national and the international level in regard to the war on MS-13 and gangs in general. Deportation as a policy creates a "merry-go-round" effect, spreading MS-13 all over Central America as well as into new regions of the United States as deportees inevitably make their way back into the country, continuously recruiting new members and seeking out fresh and unmonitored territory.

In order to examine the roots of MS-13, one must take a look back at the history of Salvadoran immigration. It is in itself something of a new phenomenon, only amounting to significant numbers after the violent civil war that decimated the small Central American country during the 1980's. Between the years of 1951 and 1970, fewer than 21,000 Salvadorans immigrated to the United States, mostly settling in Florida and California (Powell 261). In 1979, the civil war began, and raged on for twelve long years. Poverty and class inequality were the impetuses for the anti-government coup that sparked the war. In 1979, the elite, who constituted less that 1% of all landowners held 77.3% of the land and 80% of the people of El Salvador lived in extreme poverty (Read par. 1). The opposition began with largely peaceful protests that were met with brutal massacres. In response, five different leftist guerilla groups united under the banner of the FMLN (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front) to fight the government. To harness international support, the Salvadoran government claimed that the FMLN was a communist group attempting to wrest power. In reality, only one branch had Marxist origins, most of the participants were peaceful peasants who joined up in hopes of better lives for them and their families (par. 3). The United States, currently engrossed in the Cold War, bought into the irrational "red scare" and President Reagan gladly backed the Salvadoran government with one billion in financial aid, weapons, and training to contain the "communist" threat. Using the murder of two American contractors as added proof of the evils of the FMLN, Reagan gave continued strong-willed support to Salvadoran president Álvaro Magana (Bonner 45).

The war took a vicious turn when the government began deploying right-wing military death squads to eliminate suspected leftist guerillas who had taken up arms

supplied by Cuba and Nicaragua. The death squads were government-run, making them virtually above the law. The infamous bands roamed Salvadoran cities and countryside carrying out indiscriminate torture and massacres of civilians "suspected" of guerilla involvement (Mahler 38). Rape, fear, and murder were employed as means of suppressing the rebellion. The brutality reached a high-note with the El Mozote massacre of December 1981 in which 900 civilian men, women, and children were brutally slaughtered by the death squads. Aside from the constant fear of death, the other threat that plagued Salvadorans was the conscription occurring on both sides of the conflict. Young boys were often taken from their homes and made to join in the conflict or die (45). For twelve long years the war continued until, in 1992, the United States finally brokered a peace accord between the two sides, neither having been able to vanquish the other.

The results of the war were devastating. Over 70,000 people had been killed; most of them civilians. A quarter of the El Salvador's population was uprooted and more than half left the country in a massive immigration that in turn created one of the greatest refugee crises ever in the Western Hemisphere. Many fled to the United States, which between the years 1981 and 2000, admitted almost 430,000 Salvadorans (Powell 261). The psychological consequences among those who fled were starkly evident and often irreversible. Many of these immigrants where children who had fought in the war; the violence engraining itself in their minds, making it impossible for many to readjust to civilian life. Kay Read writes of children whose "development of moral agency" never occurs because they make an immediate transition from childhood to adulthood (Read

par. 9). It was young men such as these that were responsible for founding the gang that came to be known as MS-13.

MS-13 was formed in central Los Angeles in the early 1980s by Salvadoran immigrants who had fled the civil war. At the outset, the gang served to protect new immigrants from the threat of larger Hispanic gangs that already controlled the neighborhood. In the beginning, the gang numbered only a few thousand. Today, Mara Salvatrucha's estimated membership is 50,000 in Central America and around 10,000 in the United States, with large bases springing up recently in Houston, Chicago, and the Washington, D.C. suburbs of northern Virginia and southern Maryland (Washington Post Editorial). Small to medium sized "cliques" of the gang are also present in at least 33 U.S. states (Denver Post Editorial). MS-13 operations that began as small scuffles and turf battles in downtown Los Angeles have evolved into human and drug trafficking, thievery, and violent crimes taking place in multiple locations across the country as well as abroad. Rival gang members have been increasingly targeted in vicious attacks. In 2005, a member of the rival South Side Locos gang was attacked at a movie theater in the wealthy Northern Virginia suburb of Fairfax by MS-13 members wielding machetes. The man survived the assault, but was horribly mutilated, losing three fingers and suffering deep lacerations.

Membership within MS-13 is for life and getting out is not an option. Informants and those who attempt to leave the gang are intimidated and often murdered for cooperating with police. All the while, widespread recruiting brings in new members every day, drawing especially on vulnerable groups like impoverished youth and illegal immigrants. Gang leaders purposely recruit younger teens, knowing that when they are

caught and convicted by authorities, they will be given lighter sentences and will be back on the streets much quicker (Goodale par. 9). Urban Hispanic teens and preteens who are most susceptible to recruitment are in the greatest danger.

With the visible metamorphosis of MS-13 has arrived a variety of anti-gang measures enacted in an attempt to curb the spread of the group. The Senate Judiciary Committee recently enacted mandatory sentences of 10 years to life for gang-related crimes, the federal death penalty for gang murders, and the trying of 16- and 17-year-old gang members as adults (Denver Post Editorial). Police presence has been strengthened in Los Angeles problem areas. Many of these measures have been successful in recent years, forcing gang members to seek out new territory in which to set up base in; Washington, D.C. being one such place. Another major strategy of law enforcement is deportation of gang members to their native countries. In the last 12 years, U.S. immigration authorities have logged more than 50,000 deportations of immigrants with criminal records to Central America (Lopez et. al.).

The most prominent measure taken yet to halt the growth of MS-13 is a bill that would expand upon that action, thereby allowing for much larger numbers of gang members to be deported easily. The bill was passed in the House of Representatives last June and is now being considered by the Senate. House Resolution 2933, sponsored by Rep. J. Randy Forbes(R-VA), was introduced on June 16, 2005 to the House. The bill, also known as the Alien Gang Removal Act of 2005 or the "Gangbusters Bill," proposes to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to "render inadmissible and deportable aliens who have participated in criminal street gangs," and to ban U.S. entry of

individuals known to be involved in gang-related crime or activity (H.R. 2933). The bill would also deport those conspiring or attempting to commit gang-related crimes.

If passed in the Senate, the bill will become law, and will greatly affect the way gangs are combated on the federal level. By taking a bold stance such as this, the federal government is making a conscious effort to stop the spread by cutting off key leaders that are caught perpetrating crimes. The theory at hand here is that without strong leadership, the youth will desert the gang. For Salvadorans and other Hispanic immigrants, this bill has potential to save a large number of the youth from turning to gang life. With the threat of deportation, perhaps many would be deterred from the idea. For Americans, a law such as this would certainly make U.S. citizens feel safer, knowing that nearly every gang member caught and convicted would be shipped out of this country post haste. Another reassuring side of the bill is that it bars entry to anyone with any record of criminal history, making sure that only those free of ill intent are permitted entry. In all aspects the bill would appear to be a great step towards eradicating MS-13. However, upon detailed study and research of the deportation method and outcome, the faults show themselves to be greater than the benefits.

The first and foremost problem with H.R. 2933 and the deportation solution as a whole is that those deported will inevitably return the same way the majority arrived in this country in the first place: by slipping through the porous border that the U.S. shares with Mexico. Illegal immigrants, like Salvadoran Melvin "Joker" Cruz-Mendoza, see border hopping as something like a stroll in the park. He has been deported four times, spending brief periods back in El Salvador, and each time eventually sneaking back across the border to return to the U.S. (Lopez et. al.). The only accomplishment of this

method is the sending of the majority of these criminals home for a few months on the tax-payers' dollars. Another major fault resides in the bill's second part, which would bar entry to those involved in criminal activity in their home country. The underlying flaw of this method is that most of these gang members are slipping through the border illegally, not applying to become naturalized citizens, making it impossible to perform background checks. The few who enter legally will likely have no visible criminal record coming out of the corrupt Salvadoran justice system.

The unforeseen consequences of deportation are what make this bill an extremely detrimental and dangerous action. MS-13 originated in Los Angeles, not in El Salvador. According to George Gascon, the assistant chief and director of the Los Angeles Police Department's Office of Operations, when gang members began to be shipped home, they set up brand new MS-13 infrastructure almost immediately upon arrival. Gang sub-culture was implemented in areas where gang presence was previously unknown (Washington Post Editorial). What originated as a U.S.-based gang has evolved into an international affair that has spread to Honduras and Nicaragua, among other Central American countries which now harbor MS-13 members in alarming numbers. MS-13 grew explosively as the first waves of deportees arrived in El Salvador in the early 1990s. A bill such as H.R. 2933 creates what Lopez calls a "merry-go-round": an unending chain of gang members moving between the U.S. and Central America, allowing for constant coordination and communication. Instead of halting the spread of the gang, deportation has backfired, helping to spawn a viral growth of new gang cells in previously gang-free areas.

Much of the problem occurs upon arrival back in El Salvador. Salvadoran authorities often do not feel the need to imprison returning gang members unless they commit crimes on Salvadoran soil. When they are imprisoned, guards are often bribed to release gang members or at least smuggle in cell phones which provide communication between imprisoned gang leaders and protégés who carry out their orders (Lopez et. al.). Free gang members in El Salvador easily coordinate with imprisoned ones as well as those residing in the U.S., creating an international web of crime. Unlike other criminal factions, MS-13 is made up of loosely organized independent groups with few recognized leaders, making it nearly impossible for law enforcement to trace a network such as this that is constantly changing, evaporating in one place and appearing across the country in another. Due to the deportation policies of the last decade, MS-13 numbers are now far greater in Central America that in its place of origin—the United States. The reverse effects of a bill like H.R. 2933 have already shown themselves to be devastating.

If deportation will not work to fight MS-13 expansion, what will? A multi-pronged approach is necessary, attacking every aspect that contributes to gang development. First, the border that the United States shares with Mexico must be sealed. This is a daunting task, but the efforts of law enforcement to capture and deport lawbreakers are ruined by the fact that they often slip through again quickly and quite easily. The numbers would never have grown to what they are today, had the border been secured earlier on. Keeping a lax patrol in the 1990s was a mistake, but it is not too late to make it right. With increased federal efforts and support from the National Guard, great strides can be made in securing the border, thereby blocking re-entry to deportees. Broad changes can also be made in the prosecution of gang members that will send out

strong messages to the rest. Gascon suggests that instead of spending a lot of time trying to dole out multiple life sentences to a few top leaders, it would be much more effective to snag as many members as possible and send each to prison for 8-15 year terms. This would not only take a firm stance, it would separate current gang leaders from their prey, allowing time for prevention and intervention programs to take hold while simultaneously deterring gang involvement in the younger generation. In addition to this method, Gascon recognizes that territory must be denied to gangs. By increasing police presence in problem areas and instilling a culture of lawfulness and intolerance for gang activity, citizens can wrest back their community from gangs seeking to control it (Washington Post Editorial). Finally, the U.S. government must take steps to coordinate with the governments in El Salvador and Honduras, assisting them in strengthening their anti-gang infrastructure and dealing with prosecution of high-level members. By urging them to become increasingly hard-line, the benefits will spill over into the United States.

For many naturalized U.S. citizens, the growth and spread of MS-13 may not hold great importance in their day to day life. It may appear as an irrelevant, far-away problem affecting far-away people. However, in reality, this is an issue that faces every citizen, threatening all who desire security. MS-13 quickly becomes relevant to a 15-year old Hispanic youth who comes home every day to an empty house; or a low-income single mother, worrying about what her kids do when she's not home. The issue even comes into focus for the upper-class suburban family that sees gang hits taken out at their local movie theater. This plague can be beaten and it can be eradicated, but this can only be done by a government united with its citizens that see clearly the common threat and the "merry-go-round" that feeds it. The time for action is now.

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