

Federal Insider

Meet the man the White House has honored for deporting illegal immigrants

By [Lisa Rein](#) April 27, 2016

This story has been updated.

Thomas Homan deports people. And he's really good at it.

Homan is the Washington bureaucrat in charge of rounding up, detaining and kicking illegal immigrants out of the country. As Americans fight over whether the next president should build a wall on the Mexico border to keep migrants out or protect millions of them from deportation, Homan is actually hunting undocumented immigrants down right now, setting strategy for 8,000 officers on the front lines.

He was honored last week with the government's highest civil service [award](#), bestowed on federal leaders whose work gets "extraordinary" results. According to his bosses at the Department of Homeland Security, not only did Homan successfully handle an unexpected surge of unaccompanied children and families who have streamed here from Central America across the Southwest border, but last year his operations set records for the share of illegal immigrants expelled from the U.S. who had criminal records.

Many of President Obama's immigration policies have been unpopular with immigration advocates who say he has not done enough to overhaul a system that relies on deportations. But Homeland Security officials were intent on plugging Homan's success.

"The first thing I do when I get into the office every day is I read the media stories about immigration," he said in an interview before receiving a 2015 Presidential Rank Award for distinguished service at a banquet at State Department Thursday night put on by the Senior Executives Association's Professional Development League. Forty-two other senior executives were honored.

"I sit here in the morning and I get frustrated," he said. "People don't understand what we do or how we do it. They just make assumptions."

The career immigration official is quick to note that people who are deported have exhausted their due-process rights to stay in the United States “and already had their day in court.” Someone in poor health is not going to be automatically expelled, he said.

“Yes, it’s not my favorite part of the job,” Homan said of deportations. “But their due process is over. That final order of removal needs to mean something.”

If Donald Trump or Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) gets to the White House, this former New York police officer could be the person charged with deporting approximately 11 million people who are in the United States illegally. Or he could delay kicking out about 5 million undocumented migrants whom the Obama administration has sought to allow to work here legally, making its case last week before the Supreme Court.

Homan, 54, is a plainspoken — he likes to call it outspoken — former patrolman from far-upstate New York with a strawberry-blond crew cut and baby-blue eyes. He has worked almost every job at the agency now called Immigration and Customs Enforcement — border-patrol agent, investigator, supervisor, up the ranks to his current post, executive associate director for enforcement and removal operations. He joined the immigration agency in 1989.

“The entire life cycle of immigration,” he said, referring to the purview of his career. “I’ve arrested aliens. I’ve sat on low houses. I’ve worked on the front lines. I’m a cop in a cop’s job, and cops work for me,” he said, crediting his 27 years in immigration enforcement with earning him the respect of the 8,000 men and women on his staff.

The White House cited his success expanding arrests and detention beds for the recent surge in children and families fleeing violence in Central America. While the number of deportations of illegal immigrants with criminal records has declined in recent years, last year this group made up almost 60 percent of the total number expelled from the country, the largest percentage in recent memory, ICE officials said.

Homan managed these deportations with the help of an expanded fingerprinting system that local police departments share with immigration authorities.

By following the Obama administration’s directive to sharpen the focus of enforcement on criminals and foreigners who pose security threats, “We executed the mission perfectly,” Homan said.

[Obama’s immigration plan aims to limit deportations to certain groups]

But the mission is under attack from conservatives on the right and immigration advocates on the left, with Republican demands for more border enforcement and anger from Latinos who blame Obama for carrying out large-scale deportations and a failure to overhaul immigration laws. Trump has pledged to kick out illegal immigrants and build a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico, and Cruz says he would deport 11 million people who are not authorized to be here.

[How high would Donald Trump’s wall to keep out immigrants be?]

Homan’s boss, ICE Director Sarah R. Saldaña, said in a statement that she has the “utmost confidence in Mr. Homan and the work that he and all the women and men of ICE’s Enforcement and Removal Operations do every day.”

“Tom and his team are dedicated to enforcing the law every day in order to protect national security, border security and public safety.”

At a hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee in February, Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) told Homan he was disappointed that ICE had ordered only 121 people deported after immigration judges denied the asylum petitions of 1,800 migrants.

“Did people say: ‘Good work, Mr. Homan. You’re doing a good job?’ ” Sessions asked. “Or did they attack you for trying to enforce the law the judge had ordered?”

The group Human Rights First criticized the administration in a [report](#) last week charging that chronic underfunding, hiring challenges and shifting enforcement strategies have led to alarming backlogs in the asylum and immigration systems, with more than 620,000 pending removal and asylum cases.

[Homeland Security chief defends President Obama’s immigration plan to House Republicans]

Homan won’t talk publicly about the immigration debate or which side he is on. He says he is only enforcing the law as it stands now. He winces at what he calls a widespread misunderstanding on both sides of what his staff really does.

He tells his employees in the field that they have nothing to apologize for.

“They’re beaten down, frankly,” he said. “But the laws were enacted by Congress. We don’t do schoolhouse raids or neighborhood raids. We don’t show up with bulletproof vests. I’m not ashamed of what I do.”

Instead, “we arrest a lot of bad guys,” he said. “We prevent crimes.”

Homan moved to Washington in 2013 to take ICE’s top enforcement job. He said he meets a lot of new people who do not view what he does with admiration.

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“There are folks I meet who say: ‘I read this. I saw this in the news. That sounds terrible,’ ” he said. “I try to spend my time educating them.”

[President Obama’s immigration plan could collapse at the Supreme Court]

And yes, Homan has a definite opinion on Trump and his immigration policies.

“Sorry. I can’t say what I think,” he said.

Editor's note: This story has been updated to reflect that in 2015, Homan's team was responsible for a record percentage of total ICE deportations of undocumented immigrants with criminal histories. The story had incorrectly said the team was responsible for a "record number" of deportations of these migrants.

Lisa Rein covers the federal workforce and issues that concern the management of government.

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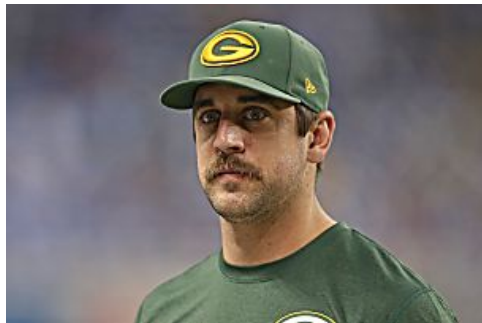
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