

**The New York Times**

## **American Internment Camps**

*By Richard Parker*

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*June 20, 2018*

TORNILLO, Tex. — Late last week a sprawling tent city opened in Tornillo, outside El Paso. It is surrounded by chain-link fencing topped with barbed wire and hemmed in between the Rio Grande and I-10. Like several others along the United States-Mexico border, the Tornillo facility is intended to hold children apprehended for entering this country illegally.

But it’s also different. The other facilities, like the converted Walmart in Brownsville, are the equivalent of short-term holding cells where parents and children are separated and then processed out to other facilities. In contrast, the Tornillo facility, already home to perhaps dozens of teenage boys — very little is known about it, and no reporters have been allowed inside — will hold hundreds of minors, possibly for months at a time. Whatever the federal government chooses to call it, this is an internment camp. (On Wednesday President Trump said he was [preparing an executive order](#) “keeping families together.”)

Much of West Texas has been turned into a new front in the Trump administration’s war on undocumented immigrants. And wars take prisoners. Some 900 adult immigrants are locked up in the El Paso County jail. Children are held at facilities run by a private outfit, Southwest Key Programs. The government is reportedly planning to incarcerate still more people on military bases in El Paso, Abilene and San Angelo.

Like a lot of wars, too, this one is long on secrecy. When I approached the facility, I was brusquely told to leave. The local Customs and Border Protection spokesman claimed to know nothing about the camp, just steps out his station’s backdoor. The Health and Human Services Department returned no phone calls. Representative Beto O’Rourke, a Democrat from El Paso who led a march here Sunday, was told he would need to wait two weeks for an appointment; his colleague, Joe Kennedy III of Massachusetts, was simply turned away.

However, Representative Will Hurd, a Republican whose district includes Tornillo, and State Representative Mary Gonzalez, a Democrat who also represents Tornillo, did get into the camp late Friday night. In an interview, Ms. Gonzalez described inmates as 16- and 17-year-old boys, assigned 20 to a tent for sleep. A big tent, closest to the gate, serves as mess hall. All are air-conditioned. The place is livable, she said — but “also dehumanizing.”

In a handful of photos released by the Department of Homeland Security on Monday, the metal, military-style bunks are stacked one on top of the other; the tent ceiling seems close enough to touch from the top bunk. The mess hall is brightly lit and furnished with folding chairs and plastic folding tables. The photos show a dozen smaller tents on concrete and with a yard of gravel and portable toilets outside, where temperatures this week will soar into the hundreds. There are one or two command posts — one was trucked in from the Texas state government —

as well as an ambulance, medical van, caseworkers, therapists and nurse practitioners, according to Representative Gonzalez. A soccer goal stands on a dirt field.

Further information is vague and contradictory. Some reports say that only unaccompanied minors are being held at the camp, but Representative O'Rourke said he was told that about 20 percent of the boys at Tornillo were separated from their parents. The facility is officially supposed to hold a few hundred boys, but Representative Hurd said he was told on the tour that it may be expanded to hold 4,000.

There is something strange about a secret facility surrounded by dozens of journalists and camera crews. At the moment, it may be the most famous camp in America. "So why," Representative Gonzalez asked after her tour, "are they trying to keep it a secret?"

The simple explanation is shame. This is not something liberal democracies are supposed to do. Israel and other countries closed immigrant prisons after domestic and international outcries. Libya continues to operate a desert prison for refugees and migrants. The last time the United States government separated children from parents on this scale was the late 19th century, when Native American boys and girls were forced into schools so they would be taught to act white. Before that, only the institution of slavery stripped away children wholesale.

The Trump administration has seized 2,000 children from 2,000 parents in six weeks, according to its own statistics. With a 1996 law, the Clinton administration began locking up undocumented immigrants. The Bush administration accelerated it. The Obama administration held entire families briefly in cells called "hieleras" — or ice boxes, because they were so cold — before an immigration hearing. But until now, no one held children captive apart from families.

As a result, these places are most reminiscent of the American internment camps of World War II. Coincidentally, one of the most notorious was called Crystal City, located 110 miles southwest of San Antonio. It held over 3,000 people of Japanese, German and Italian descent during World War II, including native-born American citizens. But even that camp was more humane: Schooling was provided for children, who were kept with families, said Carl Takei, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union whose own grandparents were split by that war: his grandmother in a camp and his grandfather fighting for the United States Army in Europe.

The government calls Tornillo and other sites "detention" facilities, emphasizing its view that the occupants are above all lawbreakers. But "internment" seems a better, more realistic and accurate term. It describes the confinement of prisoners of war, citizens of other nations and political prisoners without trial. With its troops, walls and arrests, the Trump administration is effectively waging war on a comparatively peaceful stretch of its own country, where no crisis existed.

Detention also implies some measure of due process. But while the teenagers here may see an immigration judge, it will be an administrative, nonjudicial proceeding. And if history is any guide they probably won't even get an immigration lawyer.

The government has said it can hold them for nearly two months. If it's true, then the camp in Tornillo may soon grow 10 times its current size. It is unclear when or how any of these boys will find their families again. Behind the secrets, fences and barbed wire, this is a 21st-century American internment camp. For children.

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