

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
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Ep. 167: What's Really Happening Along Our Mexican Border, From A Plain-Spoken Texas Congressman

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INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today I'm excited to be with Texas Congressman Tony Gonzales, and I'm excited to find out what it's really like at the border and at and cities in Texas. Congressman Gonzales's district runs along the majority of Texas's border with Mexico with more than 800 miles of the US-Mexico border. Texas's 23rd district has the longest stretch of the border of any congressional district. Congressman Gonzales was raised in Texas and then served in the Navy for nearly 20 years, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. He's widely respected as a non-partisan Republican having voted to establish the January 6th Commission to investigate the storming of the US Capitol. He was censored by the Texas Republican Party's Executive Committee for failing to vote in line with the party's positions. Welcome Congressman Gonzales, and thank you for your service in the military and in government, and also for joining 3 Takeaways today.

Tony Gonzales: Thanks, Lynn.

LT: Thank you. Is the southern border essentially an open border where almost anyone who wants to can cross into the United States?

TG: The quick answer is yes, and it has deteriorated, sadly, more and more at a just an astronomical pace. And for anyone who lives along the border, works along the border, this is really not a new topic for us, whether it's legal immigration or otherwise, this is something that generationally we've had to deal with. But what we're seeing at now is just the numbers are through the roof and it's not sustainable in so many different ways. And really anything that the border crisis touches turns to ash willingly or unwillingly. And you mentioned I represent 823 miles of the southern border. That's two thirds of the Texas Mexico border and 42% of the overall US-Mexico border. So this is something that I literally am dealing with daily and I get it from all angles. Just the other day I was speaking with the Chief of Border Patrol, Jason Owens, and we were talking about it from that angle. Just the other day I was speaking with the local law enforcement officers, sheriffs and PDs, and I can share some stories there. Ranchers and farmers, everyday citizens, small businesses, the migrants themselves, the nonprofits, the religious based organizations, you name it, we've been able to cover the topic, looking forward to getting into it.

LT: I do as well. Let's start with the numbers, if you will. About what percent or number of people do you think are stopped by US Border Patrol? And about how many people do you think are actually coming into the US every year through the southern border?

TG: Yeah, the numbers are going up. CBP released last month was 170,000 people. That's a very large number. You're talking millions of folks coming over illegally, and those are just the folks that are getting caught, not to mention the other people that aren't. And so back in June, the numbers had dipped a little bit to only a 100,000. And you had the Administration say, oh, it's only a 100,000. The numbers have gone down. Look at the great job that we're doing. And I was quick to point out to go, "If you think 1.2 million people coming over illegally is doing a good job, you're absolutely wrong on the issue." And once again, in a district like mine, which is pretty evenly keel as far as Democrats and Republicans, we have had enough. And some of the things that we've had enough with is imagine, Uvalde is in my district later today, I'll have an opportunity to go to a football game in small towns in Texas football, the whole town comes out.

TG: It's a very good moment to bring everyone together. But in Uvalde a little over a year ago, you remember what happened where those 19 innocent kids were murdered and the two teachers, 21 lives lost. And so what people don't really talk about is before the Uvalde shooting occurred, that school had gone into lockdown 30 different times because of these high-speed chases that came through town. And what ends up happening is you become numb to it. Now fast forward a year later, imagine you lost a child, but imagine you have two or three other children, you're going back to school, you're trying to cope with this trauma. And now imagine your school goes back into lockdown because of these high-speed chases. You're a parent or a grandparent and you get a text message on your phone that says, "Hey, your school is in lockdown because of a high-speed chase." These are some of the real parts of it, and there's nothing partisan about that should scare the heck out of anybody that has to deal with that situation. So in my district, which is really the epicenter, places like Eagle Pass and Del Rio and El Paso and Uvalde, we just want it to go away. We just want the problem to be solved. Less finger pointing, let's get real solutions to fix it.

LT: What percent of people do you think that border patrol is stopping?

TG: It's really hard for them to give you a number on that. So they'll give you the folks that they've encountered. But what I'm also seeing too is I'm seeing less people come over and just give themselves up. These are the video that you often see on some of the news stations where you see all these people lining up and they're crossing over the water usually in some kind of regular process. Well, I'm seeing less of that and I'm seeing more people being smuggled and trying to get away. And so that's the problem where you can't track those numbers. The part that I try to do is separate legal and illegal immigration, but I don't have a number because they don't have a number. But the number that they will give you is in the millions as far as people encounters.

LT: Horrifying. Let's talk about the impact of illegal immigration. What is the impact on crime?

TG: Of course. And then this is the part that I think a lot of people, all these emotions, they're angry, they're sad, they're frustrated, and they're scared because they don't feel safe. When I think of the border crisis, to me it all boils down to safety. The safety of a community. And I'll give you a specific example. My district is so massive, takes me 10 hours to get from one end to the other. So just the other day, I was in the western part of the district, 200 miles from the border, three and a half hours away, small little town. I'm meeting with the sheriff there and he tells me a story just

recently, a couple weeks ago, there were two migrants that were here illegally from Cuba that were working in the oil and gas industry. And they had saved up some money. Each of them had \$30,000 and they were going to pool their money together and they were going to purchase a truck, basically continue on kind of their own business, if you will.

TG: They're friends, they get together both from Cuba, one of the friends kills the other, steals his \$30,000, dismembers him and takes pieces of his body all over different parts of the county in different parts of the state. And that isn't a scare tactic. I'm not trying to demonize people. I'm trying to say that in this world, there are good people and there are bad people, and people do things that you never think that they would do. And a lot of times you don't know who they are. So what I see is if this person were to do that to his friend, imagine what he would do to somebody that he doesn't know. And once again, I'm not trying to demonize anybody. I'm trying, look, a lot of people are fleeing for economic purposes, they're trying to look for jobs. I get all that. But there's all these other bad actors that are embedded in there as well. And it goes back to the safety and the security of citizens, American citizens that are taxpaying, law abiding citizens that just do not feel safe. So it's sadly getting worse.

LT: What is the impact of illegal immigration on jobs?

TG: My ranchers and my farmers have taken the, probably the biggest blunt of this whole crisis. Their properties are damaged on a regular basis. Their fences are cut, they lose livestock. And this part of the state is really big into hunting. And so oftentimes you used to have these ranchers that used to have livestock and they've switched into game ranches. And so when their exotic animals get out or flee, it causes a lot of economic impact on them. But I have a lot of ranchers and farmers that go, "Hey, look, Tony, I don't have anyone to help pick my crops and I'm willing to pay." I'm willing to do all these different things, but there is literally no pool of people that will do this level of work. And so a lot of my ranchers and farmers will say, "Hey Tony, I wouldn't be so upset if some of these folks were able to stay and help me pick my crops and they're illegal or otherwise just somebody to help me pick my crops". But the facts are many of these people are not working in these areas and they're going to other parts. And if they do, they're working illegally. And so the problem I have is you're essentially encouraging people to break the law and then work illegally. And I'm trying to stop that. And I'm trying to create a legal route where people, they're vetted. We know who they are, we know where they're going, we know why they're here, and they're working in a manner that is above board and structured.

LT: How do you see illegal immigration and government resources? Are the government resources adequate? Are they being efficiently used?

TG: In my experience, it all goes back to one thing. And many things are like this. It goes back to money. And there are a lot of people that are getting rich off of this immigration crisis. And one example in El Paso, they recently opened up a new soft sided facility. This facility, I think I may be the only member of Congress to have visited so far. It's brand new. It's larger than six football fields. It's like this daycare center that's better than where my kids go to. I mean, a miraculous place holds 2,500 people. When I was there a couple months ago, the capacity was 2,500. And I asked, I'm like, oh, this is great. Look, I don't want anyone to be mistreated and be in bad situations, but how much is this costing the American taxpayers? That facility, it's just one facility is costing American taxpayers \$400 million a year.

TG: It's astronomical. What I also saw is border patrol agents in that facility, there were 201 border patrol agents to man that. So what happens when 200 agents are in that processing center, that means there's no one out in the field catching these folks on the terrorist watch list, catching fentanyl, catching things that are killing all of our kids and hurting all of our communities. So I systematically see that it is a waste of taxpayer dollars. For me, I sit on the Appropriations Committee. It's to go, how do I craft this? Many of the people in DHS and border patrol and ICE are doing good work and they're doing the best they can and I don't want to punish them for some of these other things. But how do you hold? It's all about accountability. We all should be held accountable.

LT: Your numbers are stunning. If it's costing \$400 million a year for one facility that houses 2,500 people and there are over a million coming through the border each year. Wow. You mentioned fentanyl. How much of an issue is the illegal importation of drugs like fentanyl?

TG: Oh, it's extremely serious. In many cases, it may be at the heart of this whole ordeal. We often talk about the human smuggling piece. And there's no doubt cartels, they are booming. I mean just last year the numbers came out and estimated \$13 billion in human smuggling. I mean, this is a Fortune 500 company that is basically that these cartels have created. But the fentanyl piece is that once again, this is an area that should unite us in politics, unite us as Americans, because when fentanyl kills, it doesn't kill registered Republicans and registered Democrats, it doesn't care your age or your ethnicity or sexual orientation, it doesn't care about any of that. It just kills you. The DEA shared a story with me where they busted a Mexican cartel ring that was trading a thousand pounds of fentanyl. I mean, this is deadly by the millions, a thousand pounds of fentanyl in exchange for weapons. And so these things are very real. They're not a Tom Clancy novel, what if. They're happening every single day. They're very real. And this is once again, an area where I think we all should be wanting to root for our agencies to be strengthened and stop some of these bad actors.

LT: Tony, can you summarize the impact of illegal immigration on your district? Both the good and the bad.

TG: It has turned our lives upside down. Everyday life is different, but for so many people it is different. I love Fridays because I get to go to football games. There's a small town outside of Uvalde, it's called De Henes, which means small town. I mean maybe got a thousand people in this town, something around there. There stadium is right on, kind of on the highway pretty close by. Imagine you're watching a football game, you're watching your son play, your grandson, and there's a high speed chase that wrecks right in front and then a whole bunch of people get out of their truck and then they sprint across the field. I'm not making these stories up. So it's turned people's lives upside down. And what I've seen, once again, a predominantly Hispanic community, very compassionate. I've seen people that are tired and they just want it to go away.

LT: Let's talk about possible actions on border security and immigration. What do you think about a fence or a physical deterrent?

TG: In my district, I've seen it gone from a 50/50. Half the people were for it, half the people were against it to now it's probably eight to two. Most people are for it. And once again, they're getting more and more desperate where they're willing to think outside the box or be in support of things that they weren't before. Every professional dealing with security will tell you the exact same thing.

And this is what they've told me over and over again, a wall or a infrastructure, a barrier, whatever you want to call it, is important. It's one of three pieces of the system that you need. You need a physical structure, you need manpower, people behind there to do the function and you need technology. There are parts of my district where you can't build a structure, you just can't. It's impossible. But technology is an area, once again, another one that I think is less contentious. So you could add more wall, you could add more agents or you could add more technology. The facts are, they've done very little to none of any of that. And it tells me that they have no intentions of doing some of these security measures.

LT: Do you believe the Mexican government can be an effective partner in any solution?

TG: I think it has to, whether we want to or not. Whether you like them or not, they are our neighbor and they will always be our neighbor. And a strong Mexico equates to a strong United States. Now that's easier said than done. And I don't care what country you are, things get complicated very fast. And things in Mexico are very complicated, but I'm of the mindset instead of just writing them off or instead of just blaming them for everything, you have to run to the fire. And I'd much rather see us spend our diplomatic capital building out relationships with Mexico and Central America than some of these other places. And it's not always, oh hey, how big does the check have to be?

LT: If you could do anything with your district's 823 miles of border with Mexico, what would you do?

TG: I would like to see a legal process where people can come over and work. I think if we were to solve that, I think a lot of things would change. The cartels would stop making money off of smuggling people. Law enforcement would be able to put all their resources on anybody that wasn't coming over through that process because right now there's no process. And it's easy for people that are fleeing and doing these things to get mixed in with bad people. But imagine if you did have a front door that was orderly and you knew who they were, then all of a sudden you'd go, well, why didn't you come through the front door? I mean, why are you coming through my back door? And it would be very easy, I think, to identify the bad actors and it would encourage those that are trying to seek an economic opportunity, not some of these other things.

TG: And we'd also long term, instead of having millions of people here illegally and trying to figure out how we're going to solve that, we would have people that would come and work and could go back to their country. And I think it would solve a lot of problems. It's going to take a lot of political courage in order to do that. But I recently dropped the Hire Act, which does that. It extends work visas. Once again, it doesn't tackle some of the contentious stuff. It focuses on work visas. And I'm excited it has over 40 co-sponsors split between Republicans and Democrats. I think there's an opportunity now with everything that's happening. I think it builds an ecosystem of trust. Everything is about trust and how do you get Congress to start trusting one another and going, wait a second here, we did that together. Maybe we can do something else together.

LT: Tony, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

TG: We have to have actions is one, this can't just be empty words. It can't just be folks blaming one another and round and round we go, real people are getting hurt. More and more people are dying from fentanyl and opioids and other things. And so we all should be equally vested in finding

a solution to this crisis and then results until something gets done. This is all just talk. We can all talk about all the things that are wrong in the world, but more and more lives are impacted and it's important for us to have results. Those results need to start with people that look beyond a political lens and are focused on solutions for the betterment of everybody. And the other thing I'd say too is there's also a global issue that is happening as well. Many times we think it's just happening to us. This exact same thing is happening in Europe. It's happening in Asia. And so as a world leader, I think the United States, what we do, the world is looking to follow suit.

LT: Terrific. Thank you so much. Thank you for your service in the military and thank you for your service in government now and your time today on 3 Takeaways.

TG: Happy to do it.

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