

History of Use of U.S. Military Bases to House Immigrants and Refugees

July 26, 2018

Background

On June 20, 2018, President Donald Trump signed an [Executive Order](#) that states “It is also the policy of this Administration to maintain family unity, including by detaining alien families together where appropriate and consistent with law and available resources” and that directs the Secretary of Defense to “take all legally available measures to provide to the Secretary [of Homeland Security], upon request, any existing facilities available for the housing and care of alien families, and shall construct such facilities if necessary and consistent with law.” On June 24, Secretary of Defense James Mattis confirmed that [Goodfellow Air Force Base and Fort Bliss](#), both in Texas, would be used to “provide whatever support the Department of Homeland Security needs to house the people that they have under their custody.”

Statutory Authority and Policy Documents

Statutes that authorize the Department of Defense to provide support to other federal agencies include the following:

- [Section 1535 of Title 31](#) (the “Economy Act”), which authorizes an agency to place an order with another agency to obtain supplies or services from that agency.
- [Chapter 15 of Title 10](#), governing military support for civilian law enforcement agencies, and particularly [10 U.S.C. 272](#), which authorizes the Secretary of Defense to make DOD equipment and facilities available to federal, state, and local law enforcement officials for law enforcement purposes.

Additional information on how the Department of Defense implements these authorities is contained in the following publications:

- [Department of Defense Directive 3025.18](#), *Defense Support of Civil Authorities (DSCA)*, December 29, 2010, Incorporating Change 2, Effective March 19, 2018.

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- [Department of Defense Instruction 3025.21](#), *Defense Support of Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies*, February 27, 2013.
- [Joint Publication \(JP\) 3-28](#), *Defense Support of Civil Authorities*, July 31, 2013.

According to [JP 3-28](#), “DOD provides support to other federal agencies in border security and in the event of a mass migration emergency. Historically, this law enforcement support is in the form of technical assistance, services, and facilities and only on a temporary basis.”

Historical Use of Military Bases to House Immigrants and Refugees

The United States has used military bases in the past to house large groups of immigrants and refugees. Selected examples from the past 50 years are listed below.

Unaccompanied Alien Children (2012-2017)

Between 2012 and 2017, nearly 16,000 unaccompanied alien children were housed on five military bases. See [Table 1](#) for more details.

Table 1. DOD Support to HHS for Unaccompanied Alien Children
2012-2017

Military Base	Dates	Number of UACs
Lackland Air Force Base, TX	April-June 2012	800
Lackland Air Force Base, TX	May-August 2014	4,357
Naval Base Ventura County, CA	May-August 2014	1,540
Fort Sill, OK	May-August 2014	1,861
Holloman Air Force Base, NM	January-February 2016	129
Fort Bliss, TX	September 2016-February 2017	7,259
Total		15,946

Source: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Legislative Affairs

Kosovo Refugees (1999)

From May to June 1999, more than 4,000 ethnic Albanian refugees from Kosovo were housed at [Fort Dix, NJ](#). According to the Army’s [FY1999 Historical Summary](#):

Tension in Yugoslavia between Serbs and ethnic Albanians in the province of Kosovo resulted in a growing refugee problem in the Balkans by March 1999. To assist the Republic of Macedonia in dealing with the influx of displaced people, the United States agreed to accept twenty thousand refugees from Kosovo in the spring of that year. The U.S. Army Reserve Command (USARC) at Fort McPherson, Georgia, assumed command of Operation Provide Refuge and in early April selected Fort Dix, New Jersey, to host the Kosovar refugees.... On the morning of 6 May, the first 447 refugees landed at McGuire Air Force Base, New Jersey, and proceeded to their temporary quarters at Fort Dix. Between 6 May and 9 July, the installation processed 4,025 refugees, more than a quarter of the 13,989 Kosovars admitted to the United States during this time.

Cuban and Haitian Refugees (1991-1996)

In 1991, the United States opened a refugee center at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay in Cuba for Haitians fleeing their country by boat in the aftermath of a coup. At one point, [nearly 13,000 Haitians were housed](#) there. [The refugee center closed in July 1993](#) but it was reopened in [June 1994 to again house Haitian refugees](#) fleeing their country. In August 1994, the United States [reversed a previous policy](#) allowing Cuban refugees into the United States and required instead that they be brought to Guantanamo Bay. Approximately [12,000 Haitians and 33,000 Cubans](#) were housed at Guantanamo Bay in September of 1994. The refugee camp closed in [February 1996](#).

Cuban and Haitian Refugees (1980-1982)

Starting in April 1980, Eglin Air Force Base, FL, Fort Indiantown Gap, PA, Fort McCoy, WI, and Fort Chaffee, AR, were used as refugee resettlement centers to house an influx of Cuban refugees who arrived in the United States via the “[Mariel Boatlift](#).” By October 1980, Eglin Air Force Base, Fort Indiantown Gap, and Fort McCoy were closed and their remaining refugees were transferred to Fort Chaffee. [Fort Chaffee](#) housed 25,390 refugees, of whom about 5,800 had been transferred from Fort McCoy, Eglin Air Force Base, and Fort Indiantown Gap. The refugee center at Fort Chaffee closed in February 1982.

Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong Refugees (1975-1976)

Following the collapse of the South Vietnamese and Cambodian governments in April 1975, the U.S. military evacuated refugees to temporary bases on [Guam, the Philippines, and Wake Island](#), and onward to [bases in the United States](#). [Fort Chaffee](#) housed nearly 51,000 Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong refugees. [Camp Pendleton, CA, Eglin Air Force Base, FL, and Fort Indiantown Gap, PA](#), also housed refugees, while [the Presidio of San Francisco, CA, Fort Benning, GA, and Fort Lewis, WA](#), were used to provide temporary housing and care for 1,853 orphans evacuated to the United States. Approximately [144,000 refugees](#) from Southeast Asia had been resettled in the United States as of December 1, 1976.

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