



# The real Con Air

Barack Obama's bid to rid the US of illegal immigrants with criminal records has resulted in a boom in deportation flights. **Jonathan Franklin** reports from on board one of them

**I**t is 4.30am and huge spotlights illuminate the runway. A Boeing 737 - 22 years old, paint peeling, no identification - is ready for loading at the cargo area of the George Bush international airport in Houston, Texas. A perimeter guard of US federal agents armed with shotguns stand in front of a chain-link fence topped with razor wire. These are the visible defences. "You don't see all the security; that's the point," explains Greg Palmore, a veteran agent with the US government's leading immigration police force, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Three sleek white buses roll to a stop; HOMELAND SECURITY is written across each side. Steel grates cover the windows; armoured doors and thick glass separate the driver from the 42 prisoners he is transporting. As I step inside, a roar of thick Spanish accents builds from the back of the bus. "Motherfuuuuuuuuuuuuuucker! Yo! I am going to kill yooouuuu!" The prisoners welcoming me include gang members from the Mexican mafia and the even more notorious MS-13 ("Mara Salvatrucha"), a gang known for tattooing their faces and slaughtering their enemies. "These are the most dangerous gangsters in the United States," says Sam Logan, author

of This Is for the Mara Salvatrucha, an inside account of MS-13 gang life. "A brutal transnational gang that has spread to more than 30 US states, throughout Mexico and to at least three central American countries." "I would rather die of hunger than come back here," says Carlos Rojas, a 25-year-old prisoner, as he is shuffled off the bus and on to the waiting aeroplane. He shakes the chains hanging from his waist and legs. "They have us like dogs! The only thing they didn't do is put a chain around our neck. I know we broke the law," he pulls his chains tight, "but this is too much." Rojas complains to me about the huge number of raids that are now being organised by ICE. "There are many more raids now. Roadblocks, on the highway, at work - everyone is getting caught."

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What seems to Rojas to be a sudden surge of arrests is, in fact, the result of a long-term strategy by the US government to arrest and deport the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants at large in the US. Last year, an estimated 110,000 foreigners who committed crimes in the country were arrested and deported. Now, however, under a plan announced by the Obama administration earlier this month, those figures are expected to increase sharply. Under the new procedures, between one and two million immigrants with criminal records are expected to be deported over the next few years, making this all-too-real version of the Hollywood film *Con Air* a booming business. As the prisoners board, burly security guards form two rows and search each convict for hidden weapons (including in their mouths). Next to the prisoners are three rows of clear plastic bags: the inmates' possessions, reduced to a supermarket-sized carrier. I look inside one and see a Bible, toothbrush, letters and a red belt buckle, cow horns raised - testament to a macho swagger now reduced to the clank of chains and the shuffle of sneakers with no laces. To prevent suicide, belts and shoelaces are removed for the flight. Their baggy trousers flop like limp sails. One detainee, months earlier, made a break

from here. Despite his restraints he made it across the runway and over the concertina wire. "We caught him in the woods," says an agent. The plane's itinerary reads like a poor man's bus service - hopping around the American southwest, often until there are no seats left. Today's flight starts in Houston, stops in southern Texas, then on to the east coast where Salvadoran prisoners are loaded aboard like unwanted cargo and shipped home. Aboard the plane, the prisoners are directed to stay seated, keep quiet and obey orders. Instead of passport numbers, the passenger manifest on this flight lists each man's most recent crime - drug trafficking, indecency with a child, assault, drunk driving, theft, aggravated assault, sexual assault. Each prisoner is handcuffed. Chains hold their ankles so tightly together that they must take baby steps to avoid falling. Another hangs around their waist, pulling their hands down so hard they cannot scratch their faces. As the plane rockets down the runway and leaves the ground, the prisoners scream like children on a rollercoaster - for many, it is the first and only time in their lives that they will board an aeroplane. All the passengers stare out of the windows. Some squeeze their eyes shut. Some pray.

"Look how little the cars are!" says a man charged with armed assault sitting behind me. He is fascinated by the bird's eye view of Houston. "This is much better than the bus." As the flight levels out, the prisoners are allowed to use the bathroom - with an escort. A phalanx of guards watches, making sure prisoners can't attack an enemy or start a fight. It is early in the flight and we are too full - 124 prisoners, half Mexicans and half Salvadorans. With rival gangs and rival nationalities aboard, the 15 guards are on high alert - though none is allowed to carry a gun. "It's illegal for us to arrive in a foreign nation with firearms," explains another ICE agent. Tear gas is impractical too, amid the recycled cabin air. All that's between the cockpit and the cons is a row of Akal Security guards, though

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they appear to have enough power to keep the convicts quiet. "They are very protective of the cockpit," the co-pilot reassures me. "I will be back here [in the US] in less than a month," a prisoner tells me as the plane crosses the Gulf of Mexico on the way to San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. "They say that if they catch me again, I will get 20 years, but I am still going home." When this man says "home" he means south Texas, which boasts a huge Hispanic population, endless rows of *taqueria* shacks and the poverty-induced chaos that leads to numbers of assault and murder. When the plane approaches El Salvador, the men began cheering, hooting and celebrating. "They talk back [to us] and say, 'I'm going home, nothing you can do to me now,'" explains Brett Bradford, the ICE agent in charge of the flight. At the airport, the criminals are handed over to Salvadoran officials to be checked for open arrest warrants. The men march down the gangway of the plane. The thick, tropical heat is a welcome breath of fresh air. Hands above their heads, the men form a line between two rows of policemen and walk towards a grove of palm trees. Despite their slow shuffle and slumped bodies, it will not be long before they have mobilised back into action - headed north, back towards the US ●

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