Exhibit A

The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

Investigations

He supported the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Now he may be deported to the Taliban.

He escaped Afghanistan and started a family in the U.S. Then ICE arrested him. If he is deported, he expects the Taliban to kill him.

October 14, 2025

H's brother, M, heads for a visit at an immigration detention center. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

By John Woodrow Cox

In his cell, the light glows all night, so he pulls a blanket over his head and burrows into the darkness. Then comes his nightmare, about the Taliban fighter whose face appears in a cloud of black smoke, beard long, hand reaching toward him. He runs and he runs until he wakes up, gasping.

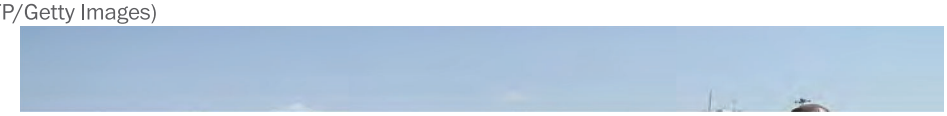
Now, in the light, he worries it's not a dream but a vision of his future in Afghanistan, where he will be tortured and killed, where his wife will starve, where his son will be forced to join the militants, where his daughter will become an old man's fourth wife.

This is the place the U.S. government delivered him out of and the place it intends to send him back to.

"I'm so scared from Taliban," he said in a call to his attorney after another hard night at the immigrant detention center in Virginia. "Right now, my body is shaking. My hands are shaking, if I am thinking about them."

He and his wife had been among the tens of thousands of Afghans desperate to escape Kabul's airport in August 2021, when a suicide bomber killed more than 180 people, including 13 U.S. service members. They heard the explosion, saw the wounded, and less than a day later, they packed into a U.S. military cargo plane bound for Qatar.

Afghans climb atop a commercial plane as they wait at the airport in Kabul on Aug. 16, 2021, amid the U.S.'s chaotic withdrawal. (Wakil Kohsar/AFP/Getty Images)



Afghan passengers wait to leave the Kabul airport in August 2021. (Wakil Kohsar/AFP/Getty Images)

In the United States, he was granted humanitarian parole, allowing the couple to remain while his case was processed. He applied for asylum in 2022 and waited for a decision that never came. Then, in July, as President Donald Trump's administration was dismantling programs created to assist Afghan allies, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers arrested him.

At a time when the courts are denying a record number of asylum claims, a judge will soon decide whether he should be deported. If he is returned, he expects the Taliban to be waiting for him.

The regime, he says, knows his family supported the U.S. for years. He taught teenagers how to use computers for a U.S.-based nonprofit, defied the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and attended the American University of Afghanistan, a symbol of Western ideals. His older brother risked his life as an interpreter for the U.S. Army, narrowly escaping two suicide bombings, before he moved to Virginia and earned his citizenship.

For their family's safety, The Washington Post is identifying the man in custody only by an initial, H.

The Trump administration has called its deportation targets "the worst of the worst" — "monstrous" and "barbaric" criminals who entered the

country illegally. “Animals,” Trump has said. “Not human.”

But the 200,000 Afghans who have found refuge in this country since the war’s end hold a unique place in the diaspora of American immigrants. Many braved extraordinary danger on the government’s behalf, and the overwhelming majority came here legally. Lawmakers hosted news conferences to celebrate the arriving heroes. Churches found them homes, clothes, jobs. At airports, greeters held signs in Dari that read, “Welcome to your new home.”

In a statement to The Post, Assistant Homeland Security Secretary Tricia McLaughlin called H “illegal” and an “unvetted alien from a high threat country.”

“The Biden administration abused its parole authority and let in unvetted illegal aliens including known suspected terrorists, gang members and criminals, and the Trump administration is correcting that.”

McLaughlin acknowledged to The Post that she described H as “illegal” only because her department revoked his parole when it arrested him. The Department of Homeland Security declined to say whether it suspected H, who is in his late 20s, of supporting terrorism or how many “known suspected terrorists” it had identified.

Tricia McLaughlin, Department of Homeland Security assistant secretary, called H “an illegal alien” after her department revoked his parole. (Jose Luis Magana/AP)

H, a fluent English speaker who worked as a bookkeeper in Virginia, has not been charged with any crime.

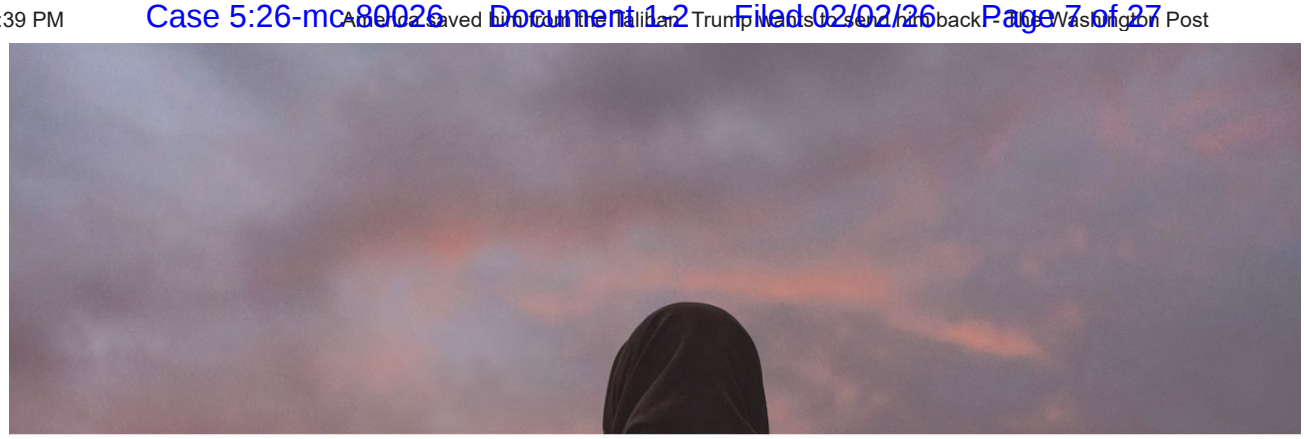
"He's not illegal, and he's not unvetted. He couldn't have been any more vetted," said his attorney, Amin Ganjalizadeh. "He followed every conceivable rule there is to follow."

To board the C-17 out of Afghanistan, according to H and his wife, he provided documents showing more than a decade of work and education that aligned with U.S. interests. His brother, beloved by the U.S. Marines and Army officers he served with, vouched for him. He submitted to background checks in Qatar and at Dulles International Airport. At Fort Pickett in Virginia, where he and his wife were housed for a month, they each provided photos and fingerprints to run through international databases. They were screened again when they applied for their humanitarian parole and work authorizations, and H's asylum application required him to interview with Homeland Security for nearly two hours.

Now, on his worst nights in the detention center, he reminds himself of the promise America made to Afghans who supported its cause: "Nobody will be left behind."

H thought that was true four years ago, he says, when he and his wife moved in with his brother in Virginia. For 12 hours a day, he drove for Uber and built furniture in a factory, and at night, he took accounting classes online. He had two children, a girl and a boy, and sang them "Wheels on the Bus" in English. His only traffic ticket, for going 37 mph in a 25-mph zone, was dismissed by a judge. He celebrated Thanksgiving with new friends, adopted the Chicago Bears, savored the buffet at Golden Corral. He imagined taking the naturalization oath and raising his family in the suburbs. He believed in Donald Trump.

"I belong to this country," H decided one day, so when he saw American flag stickers on his neighbors' trucks and SUVs, he ordered one for himself.



Both H and his wife, E, pictured here, still have family in Afghanistan. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

He had just asked his wife to send him their grocery list when H noticed lights flashing in his rearview mirror. She listened over the phone as an officer asked him to confirm his name, then ordered him out of the car. That's when he spotted the letters on the man's chest.

"I'm being arrested by ICE," he told his wife, and she went silent, unable to speak.

H, who'd been on his way to the bookkeeping job he started in March, said he felt the pinch of handcuffs for the first time in his life. By then, four law enforcement vehicles had pulled up, he recalled. Some of the men wore masks.

"Why am I being arrested?" H asked.

It was a morning in mid-July, and the officer, he said, told him his immigration documents had expired.

That wasn't true, H replied, and he could prove it.

"Can you let me grab my ID? It's in the car," he recalled pleading, but the officer refused.

H, who shared an abbreviated version of this account in a sworn affidavit, said he asked to call his lawyer, but the officers denied him that, too.

His driver's license and employment authorization were both valid through July 31, three weeks after his arrest, The Post confirmed. Federal records show that his humanitarian parole wasn't scheduled to expire until late August.

Homeland Security did not respond to questions about the interaction or the case. In a three-page letter to H dated 28 days after his detainment, a department official wrote that the agency had terminated his parole after it "determined that neither humanitarian reasons nor public benefit warrant your continued presence in the United States."

Both H and his wife, E, still have family in Afghanistan, and because of the Taliban's documented history of retribution, The Post is withholding many details that it has confirmed and would typically report.

"If an Afghan ally's name is identified, then any family to that person may be persecuted," said retired Marine Anna Lloyd, executive director at Task Force Argo, a nonprofit that has evacuated thousands of interpreters and others who served alongside the U.S. military. "The de facto leadership operating in Afghanistan doesn't stop at killing the person of interest. It's not unheard of for them to kill the bloodline."

That's why The Post is excluding the names, ages and locations of H and his family; the names of the nonprofit he served and the companies he worked for in Afghanistan, most of the schools he has attended, the firm that employed him at the time of his arrest, the detention facility where he's being held; the specific timing of his arrival and other events; the date and site of his hearing; and the name of the judge who will decide his future.

H had hired Ganjalizadeh in March to help with his stalled asylum application, and the attorney had told him not to worry. None of his Afghan clients had ever been arrested or denied asylum.

E checks on her two children at her brother-in-law's home in Virginia. Since H's arrest, she and the kids have struggled to deal with their isolation. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

H's two children, both U.S. citizens, play with their cousin. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

Under Trump, though, the U.S.'s treatment of displaced Afghans has shifted dramatically. His administration canceled humanitarian parole and other protections for tens of thousands who, like H, the U.S. government brought to this country. For many more still stranded abroad, Trump officials have made resettlements nearly impossible.

Since January, ICE has targeted Afghans more aggressively than in recent years, detaining at least 133 through late July, according to figures gathered by the Deportation Data Project. How many have been sent back remains unclear.

In May, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi L. Noem claimed there had been "notable improvements" in Afghanistan under the repressive regime, which continues to oversee widespread hunger and poverty, has prohibited millions of girls from receiving an education and recently shut down the internet across the country. In her statement, she said that "requiring the return of Afghan nationals to Afghanistan does not pose a threat to their personal safety."

Just this month, the U.N. Human Rights Council passed a resolution arguing that the Taliban's system of oppression "should shock the conscience of humanity." The council asserted that the militants have erased women and girls from public life, arbitrarily executed former officials, tortured peaceful protesters and disappeared activists.

How The Post reported this story

Afghans facing deportation seldom give interviews because they fear that the Taliban will retaliate against them or their families. H and his family provided The Post rare access to their experience on the condition that the story protect their identities.

Post reporter John Woodrow Cox interviewed H for hours, witnessed lengthy calls with his attorney and accompanied his older brother, M, during a visit to the ICE detention facility where H is being held. Along with photographer Carolyn Van Houten, Cox spent hours at home with M and H's wife, E. To verify elements of H's account, Cox interviewed friends and former colleagues of the family as well as the founder of the nonprofit H worked for in Afghanistan. Cox also reviewed hundreds of pages of documents and photographs detailing H, E and M's work, education and immigration histories.

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H had long admired the president, whom he refers to as "Mr. Trump." The U.S. military's disastrous pullout had left him and many other Afghans disillusioned with former president Joe Biden's administration, but Trump promised strength, suggesting he would retake Bagram air base.

H had heard Trump's rhetoric on immigration, but his threats seemed focused on people who crossed the border illegally.

"I was supportive," H recalled. "I was saying, 'Yes, every country has their rights. If you're a president, you should protect your country.'"

He told his brother last year that if he had a vote, he would cast it for Trump.

“Why?” his brother asked.

“He’s thinking about us,” said H, who had always seen himself as the sort of person America would welcome.

His father had taught him that Afghanistan could never be free if its people were not educated. So, to learn English, H listened to CNN for hours and studied the subtitles on episodes of “Lost.” He memorized every word to Celine Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On,” from “Titanic,” and translated them into Dari for his friends.

“He has a tremendous capacity of leadership, positive thought, independent work and the desire to channel his ideas through creative methods,” a teacher in Afghanistan wrote in a recommendation letter, calling him “among the best students I have ever taught.”

H’s parents arranged his marriage, but he insisted on one condition: The woman they chose had to be educated. In E, who is in her 20s, he found a wife with shared ideals. She aspired to become a doula.

“One day, maybe we will have a good life,” he told her. “We will have our master’s degrees. You will be a doctor. I will be a good accountant, and we will have a good life.”

The couple left nearly everything they owned in Afghanistan. He came with only two shirts but more than a dozen diplomas, report cards and academic certificates, half from his study of English.

In Virginia, when his daughter learned to count to 10 before she turned 2, he prayed she would grow up to work for NASA as a scientist.

He wonders what his three-month detainment has done to his kids, both U.S. citizens. They sometimes refuse to eat now, and his daughter no longer sleeps through the night. When they ask where Dada is, E doesn’t know what to tell them.

The first time they visited him at the detention center, his son, a toddler, climbed atop the table and pounded his small fists into the glass that separated them.

“Open it!” he screamed. “Open it!”

Afterward, H asked his wife not to bring them back for a while.

Now, his mind returns every day to what an investigator told him just after the arrest.

“What will happen to my wife and kids?” H asked.

“Don’t worry,” he said the agent replied. If the U.S. government sent him back to Afghanistan, it would send them, too.

Attorney Amin Ganjalizadeh has represented hundreds of people seeking asylum, and none of his Afghan clients had been arrested by ICE before H was detained in July. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

Have you ever been a member or have you supported the Taliban or any other terrorist group?” Ganjalizadeh asked over the phone from his office in Falls Church.

“No,” H answered from his cell in the detention center. “Never.”

Every word would matter at the asylum hearing, his attorney had explained, so they needed to prepare. Ganjalizadeh didn’t know what evidence, if any, Homeland Security might present, but he suspected prosecutors would scrutinize former friends and relatives for links to terrorism.

Such ties are not unusual, Afghan experts told The Post, because terrorist groups have flourished in the country for decades and, after the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban seized control of all 34 provinces. Millions of Afghans are going hungry, leaving former U.S. allies with a brutal choice, the experts say: Work with the Taliban or starve.

But any association, no matter how distant, could derail an asylum claim. U.S. statutes governing the process are so broad, Ganjalizadeh said, that if an applicant served tea a decade ago to someone affiliated with a terrorist group, it could disqualify them.

Now, on the call, H told his attorney that the FBI had showed him a photo of Islamic extremists that the investigators claimed came from a laptop he had owned in Afghanistan.

“I am 100 percent sure this is not from my laptop,” H recalled telling the agents, who he said acknowledged they’d made a mistake. “In my laptop, you will find my studies, my teachers’ lectures, my books, my pictures.”

The FBI declined to answer questions about the case, citing its policy not to confirm or deny the existence of investigations.

H’s brother, a former interpreter for the U.S. Army, takes a collect call from the detention center. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

H’s case comes at a time when the courts, under immense pressure from the Trump administration, are denying a far higher percentage of asylum claims than they did in years past. Unlike federal judges who receive lifetime appointments meant to ensure independence,

immigration judges work for the Justice Department. Dozens have been fired since Trump took office.

Former judges, union leaders and members of Congress allege that the sweeping dismissals are a political ploy to accelerate deportations.

Immigration judges denied 76 percent of asylum claims between February and August, according to an analysis of data collected by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse at Syracuse University. That represents a 24 percent increase over the same period last year, and the total number of denials — more than 58,000 — is the highest during any seven-month stretch in at least a quarter century.

Ganjalizadeh tried to assure H that his claim would be persuasive.

“One of the most important things about your case is something called credibility — whether the judge believes you, whether the prosecutor believes you,” the attorney said into the phone. “We already have a lot of evidence to show who you are as a person.”

H would make a compelling witness, Ganjalizadeh thought. His tone was gentle but confident. He told stories in fine detail. He could forgo an interpreter and address the court in English. And he’d been embraced by his American community.

Fifteen people sent letters to the judge on his behalf, including his boss and his children’s doctor.

“I have come to know him as one of the best people I’ve ever met,” one friend wrote. “He is honest, respectful, and always willing to help others.”

“He spoke with heartfelt conviction about his American dream and his desire to raise his children — both born here — as proud, contributing citizens of this country,” wrote Russell York, a former civilian contractor who worked alongside H’s brother in Afghanistan. “He is not only hardworking and honest, but also hopeful and deeply patriotic.”

“They are not only peaceful and law-abiding but also hard-working, generous people who would be an asset to our country,” wrote Brittney Rossie, who, along with her husband, Alex, has become close with H and E. “Our nation asked for help during a time of conflict, and this family answered that call. Now, we must stand with them.”

Alex and Brittney Rossie met H and E at a doctor's office and have since shared several meals together, including on Thanksgiving. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

The letters helped, Ganjalizadeh told him, but most critically, H needed the judge to understand the danger he would face in Afghanistan, so H decided he would share his memories of violence.

On a summer evening in late August 2016, he was reading a cost accounting book in the library at American University of Afghanistan in Kabul when a car bomb exploded outside. It shook the building. He ran toward a back door. By morning, the Taliban had killed at least 15 people, among them seven students and a professor.

"Why do you think they would want to kill you?" the attorney asked.

"Because we were against each other. Our ideas were against each other," he replied, explaining that the regime had distorted Islam. "My religious idea is against them. Totally different with them. My political idea."

Homeland Security would later file a collection of exhibits in H's case suggesting it intends to argue that Afghanistan is now safe to return to.

The evidence noted that local airports continue to function and that there had been few documented cases of abuse among Afghans returning from nearby countries, such as Pakistan and Turkey. The filing also showed that the educational nonprofit H once worked for appeared to remain open, though no one responded to messages The Post sent to its email address, and the group's founder said she believed it had ceased operating inside the country.

One included report, published in Europe last year, never mentioned the U.S., but it suggested that the Taliban had little information on returning Afghans, who would not be persecuted simply because they had left. In passages Homeland Security did not highlight for the court, the report said that Afghans who departed after 2021 are often considered "traitors and sinners," those deemed "Westernized" may be threatened, and anyone who learns English could face violence.

Now, in Ganjalizadeh's office, he reached the last of his 70 questions. H would do well in court, the attorney told him, but his client acknowledged he'd begun to deteriorate. The nightmares persisted. He'd lost weight.

"I'm getting so much depression. During the night, I don't have sleep, thinking about, thinking negative, about if I've been deported," he said. "I know a woman in Afghanistan who had five kids. She couldn't survive. She couldn't give food to the five kids, and she decided to sell one of her kids."

He began to weep.

"What will happen to my kids?" he asked, the pitch in his voice rising. "What will happen to my wife?"

For nine seconds, the phone went quiet.

"One day I helped U.S. against Taliban," he said, "and today, they are sending me back to them? For what?"

E's children have struggled since their father was detained three months ago. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

His wife sometimes felt like a prisoner, too. E's driver's license had also expired in the weeks after her husband's arrest, which meant she couldn't pick up groceries or practice English with her friends at a local church, attend doula classes or take her son to the pediatrician.

"Don't worry," H told her. "I will come to you."

She worried anyway.

"That I can't study more," she said, listing her fears. "I can't get a job, my dream job. My daughter won't be able to study."

When he came home, her husband promised, they would rebuild the life they'd started. H would try to get his old job back and prepare harder for the certified public accountant exam. E would retake the courses she'd dropped, even if he had to drive her. When the kids were asleep and the work was done, they would eat popcorn on the couch and catch up on episodes of "The 100," their favorite sci-fi show on Netflix.

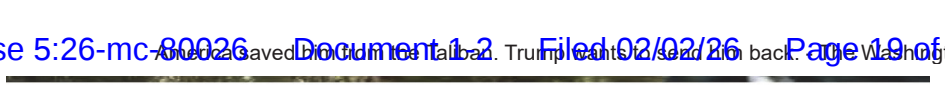
E had never applied for asylum, both because she didn't have a strong case for it and because she expected her husband's claim, if it was granted, to extend her the same protections.

Still, even when her humanitarian parole expired, they both felt certain that ICE would not arrest her, too.

"Because of my children," E explained on a September afternoon, one day before an email from Homeland Security arrived in her inbox.

"YOU ARE ORDERED to appear before an immigration judge," the letter read, "… to show why you should not be removed from the United States."

Her head throbbed. She didn't know what to do, so she texted her teachers. That night, two of them stopped by.



Esther Jones, left, and Nora Twum helped teach E English through a Christian ministry. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

Esther Jones and Nora Twum had met E more than a year earlier at a Christian ministry in Northern Virginia where they taught English, primarily to Afghan women. She'd become a star student, eager for correction, interpreting for her classmates. Many of them attended, Jones said, so they could communicate with their kids' doctors and teachers, but E had made clear she was preparing for a career.

In the basement at her brother-in-law's home, where she lived, E welcomed Jones and Twum with cups of chai and a plate of pistachios

and green raisins. She was too distraught to eat.

If E was taken into custody, Jones asked, who would she want to care for her children?

E didn't understand.

"Are they going to come for me?" she asked as tears streaked her cheeks.

The women told her to make a plan for the kids and put it in writing.

"I'm so sorry," Twum said, keeping to herself what she really thought: "This is inhumane."

E and her children leave their attorney's office in Virginia. A judge will decide her husband's asylum claim at an upcoming hearing. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

E reviews her statement describing why she fears returning to Afghanistan. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

E spoke to her husband the next morning. He thought they should consult with his attorney.

For now, she shouldn't walk the kids to the park as often, H told her. And she shouldn't visit him anymore.

He had been held for 70 days in an American detention center for unwanted foreigners, but he still could not accept that the people in charge of this country would deprive his children of their mother.

"Our Homeland Security, they're human. They know you have kids. They know. They said *they* have kids," he told her. "They will not do this."

What he didn't know was that they had done this, to other immigrants, for years. In Trump's first term, the U.S. government separated more than 4,000 children from their parents, with no plan to reunite them. Since Trump took office a second time, ICE has stripped away hundreds more, sending many to federal shelters.

Military coins given to H's brother, M, who worked with U.S. service members in Afghanistan. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

The sun had nearly set on an orange-sky Sunday evening last month, and H's brother, M, was still waiting in a visitation line outside the detention center. A flock of starlings sang in a nearby tree. Kids drew shapes on the sidewalk with rocks.

M's mind was on politics. The former interpreter had heard about all the immigration judges being fired, and he understood that those who remained, including the one overseeing his brother's case, might feel pressure to deny more claims.

"What about the oath?" he asked. "The judge oaths that he will say the right things, or he will do the right thing, not the wrong thing."

Years ago, when his work uniform came with a bulletproof vest, M never left home without telling his wife and mother goodbye, because he understood the risk of serving the U.S. military. Once, M said, a firefight trapped him in a car for 18 hours.

Now he recalled his naturalization ceremony.

"I oath for this country," he said, raising his right hand as an American flag hung limp from a pole 30 feet behind him.

"Trying to cross the red light, I remember that I oath," he continued. "I oath, not going to do anything wrong for this country."

An hour later, M reached the front of the line. He signed in and passed through a metal detector. From the vending machines, he bought a Butterfinger, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups and Takis Fuego chips, H's favorite.

A staff member escorted him to the first bay, and he spotted his brother through the glass. They smiled at each other and reached for the black phones on the wall.

H had worn a white long-sleeve shirt beneath his buttoned-up blue uniform, but M could tell his brother had lost more weight. Prayer beads H had fashioned from dried coffee grounds hung from his wrist, and on his hand was a wedding ring. To make it, he'd unscrewed the cap from a water bottle and peeled off the small plastic band, then meticulously wrapped it in a soft white wire.

"To show everyone that I love my wife," he said.

M assured him that she and the kids were okay, and he asked about life inside the center.

Most of the other inmates only spoke Spanish, H said, but he had made some friends. He joined in the soccer matches outside and learned to play spades, conquian, ocho loco. When word spread that he was a bookkeeper, H said, he became the de facto estate manager for people who got out, holding onto leftover items to pass on to new arrivals. He divvied out cups, plates, $18 shirts so the guys wouldn't have to buy new ones.

"If he saves that," H said, "he might can call his wife two, three weeks."

Most of the men he'd met were undocumented or had been charged with a felony, usually DUI. One, from Guatemala, had lived in the U.S. for 25 years. He'd told H that he worked a steady job, bought a home, paid his taxes, had five children.

The mass deportations reminded H of an Afghan idiom: "When the fire comes, wet and dry, everything will burn."

H had begun to think he wasn't the only wet tree set ablaze in a forest of immigrants, and he couldn't help but question Trump. He'd met dozens of other inmates who, even if they'd crossed the border illegally, had

built meaningful lives in the U.S. Now the government was sending many of them to places they hardly knew.

“How it can be applied for everybody?” he asked. “Somebody have property here, somebody have kids here, somebody have business here. You know, people, they don’t have nothing in their country. Everything is here.”

Near the visit’s end, M suggested that what H had endured might help him in the years to come. Whatever investigation the government had undertaken would surely resolve any doubts about his background or allegiances.

“I’m sure there is nothing to worry about.”

H nodded.

“Of course,” he said, recalling what he had told himself when he first arrived in the U.S.

“I will have my kids here,” he said. “I will have my education here. I will raise my kids here. They will go here to school, to public school. They will have American friends. They will speak English. And one day I will die, and I will go in this land. My grave will be in this land.”

He finished his bag of chips, and the brothers said goodbye. H ate beans for dinner, checked in with his wife and went to bed. Then he pulled the blanket over his head and hoped that what he had told himself was true.

E visits the couple's attorney at his office in Falls Church. (Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post)

Emmanuel Martinez and Monika Mathur contributed to this report.

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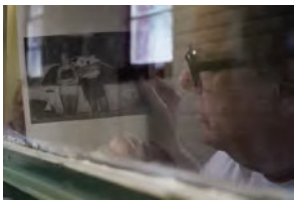

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December 18, 2024

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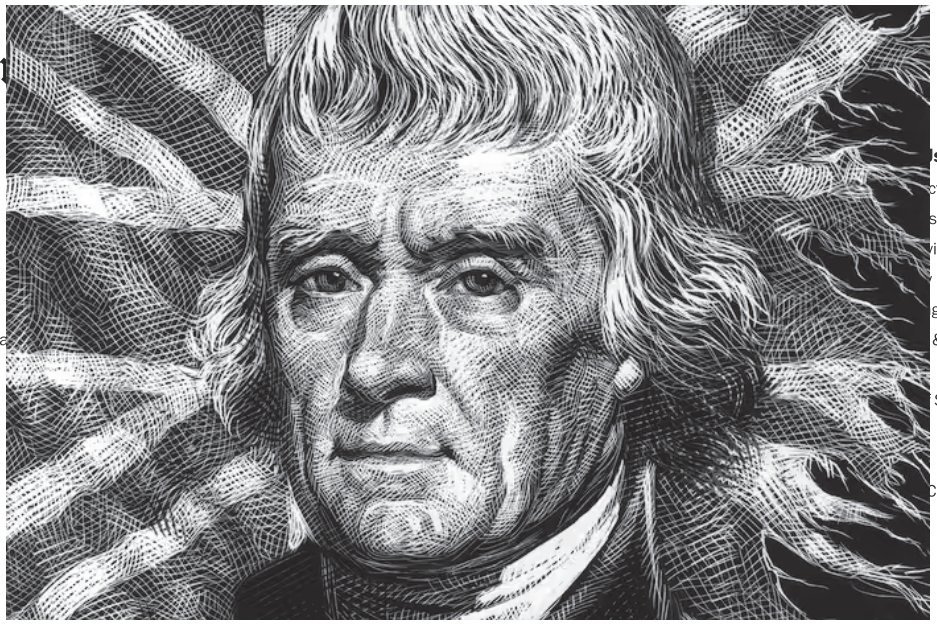

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