

NINA MOINI: Six months ago, it was the height of Operation Metro Surge. Observers were sharing videos daily of violent arrests and confrontations. Minnesota was the center of President Donald Trump's immigration enforcement. Since then, there's been a shift in leadership and optics, and immigration enforcement has become less visible.

Joining us with an overview is a reporter, who's been tracking that shift. Nick Miroff covers Immigration and the Department of Homeland Security for *The Atlantic*. Thanks for being with us, Nick.

NICK MIROFF: Good to be with you.

NINA MOINI: We really appreciate the sort of national view that you're able to provide us with. Six months ago, like I mentioned, there was a whirlwind of news, information coming out of Minnesota here. And then some changes began to happen, with the ousting of former Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem. Of course, Border Patrol Commander Greg Bovino was out. Take us back to what happened sort of right after they left, if you would.

NICK MIROFF: Well, the White House brought in Tom Homan, the border czar, to try to clean things up politically and to de-escalate the tensions with protesters. So Homan went to Minneapolis, as your listeners know, and kinda went to work trying to turn down the temperature, so to speak. And really, that was about, in his words, returning to ICE's traditional targeted enforcement tactics, in which they're not just going through neighborhoods and sweeping people up and clashing with protesters. They're researching the people that they want to take into custody, and then going out and trying to do that, without the kind of pressure and the scrutiny of cameras on them all the time. And really, that is the strategy that the administration has been pursuing across the country since then.

And so, while it may seem like ICE has been quieter, last month, they hit the highest numbers so far, in this administration, in terms of the number of arrests they're making nationwide. And the reason it's not as visible is because it's happening everywhere across the country, rather than just focused on one city like Minneapolis.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, a lot of people are saying, have things quieted down or are we just not seeing what's going on? There were no longer agents surging into one metro area so visibly. But then in the last couple of weeks, as you know, of course, there have been two more people killed by ICE. How did DHS handle those killings in comparison to the killings here, of Renee Good and Alex Pretti? And I just want to say their names. In Houston, Texas, 52-year-old Lorenzo Salgado Araujo, originally from Mexico, and in Biddeford, Maine, 26-year-old Joan Sebastián Durán Guerrero, originally from Colombia. So those are the two individuals who were killed in the last couple of weeks.

NICK MIROFF: Yeah, that's right. I mean, we saw a very different response from the administration this time around. It was not the knee jerk attempt to smear the deceased as domestic terrorists, without even ascertaining the facts of what occurred. In both instances, the Department of Homeland Security, while saying that the officers acted in self-defense, they said that the investigation would play out. You saw Homan in saying that officers will be held accountable if they did something wrong. There were quick announcements of investigations, internal investigations, as well as by the FBI.

Now, are they going to lead to accountability? I think that remains to be seen. And I think that the fact that there isn't video footage, in addition to the administration being faulted for not having body cameras on these officers that were operational, despite receiving billions of dollars, in addition to that, I think, the fact that there weren't really good bystander videos of these incidents is also an indication of how things have changed since Minneapolis. Because so much of what we saw on the streets of Minneapolis was occurring in public view because there were people mobilized out on the street.

Well, now that these ICE operations are more diffuse, they're happening all over the country, there aren't people necessarily filming them right away. And that's a big reason we don't have any footage so far, at least, of what occurred in these two shootings.

NINA MOINI: What is your take on some of the reporting that's been out there that the FBI would no longer be investigating these ICE confrontations?

NICK MIROFF: You know, I'm going to withhold judgment on that. The Department has said that, that isn't true. And, I don't have a clear sense of whether to gauge that as an attempt to reduce accountability. Because until now, they've been trying to go in the other direction, in part, for public relations purposes. And I think it really remains to be seen whether that will hold up. And we'll see what happens the next time there's a lethal use of force incident.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, I think, it's hard for people to process what is being said publicly versus what might be instructed behind-the-scenes or within certain departments. There were the two shootings, of course, in Maine and Texas. And then DHS Secretary Markwayne Mullin had put out a memo telling ICE agents to stop traffic stops, which is a big change from what we saw here in Minnesota, as you know. But then, President Trump reversed that order. So what do you know about why Secretary Mullin initially made that policy decision, and then the reversal?

NICK MIROFF: Yeah, that was an extraordinary sequence. Secretary Mullin, who replaced Kristi Noem and is really only a few months into the job and didn't bring a background in immigration enforcement or even law enforcement, we that we got on the phone with Maine Senator Susan Collins and Senator Angus King after the killing in Maine. And they expressed their concerns about what had occurred. I know that Mullin was also hearing from senior ICE officials who were warning him that a lot of the new officers, in particular, didn't get the training they thought that they needed, that they hadn't fully deployed the body cameras. And there's just been a kind of a growing uneasiness with the violence of these traffic stops and potential for deadly incidents of this kind.

So there was already concern at ICE, and I think that Mullin picked up on that and tried to do something decisive. But the backlash online from the hard right elements, including former Commander Greg Bovino, whoever, your listeners will remember from Minneapolis, and those voices really got to the White House and got into the president's ear. And he basically countermanded Mullins's order.

And so now, we're at a place where ICE officers are being advised that they shouldn't do these vehicle stops unless it's being filmed. That's something that they've been given orally as an instruction. But we're very much still in this place where things are in flux. And I think there's still a lot of apprehension about the way these vehicle stops could play out, as ICE continues to rely on that tactic as their principal way to get people.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, there are changes in optics that are occurring, but policy wise, have things changed? I'm reading here, there were more deportations last month than any other time in President Trump's second term.

NICK MIROFF: Yeah, there were more ICE arrests last month than any other month since Trump took office. And a lot of those occurred during vehicle stops. One of the issues that ICE is facing is that, they're used to going to people's homes, trying to catch them early in the morning. That is like the typical ICE playbook. And they were not getting-- people were not opening their doors. They, through either legal aid trainings and social media, have learned that if the officers don't have a judicial search warrant, they're not able to go into your residence. And so, officers adapted by trying to catch people as they were getting into their cars or leaving for work. And that's a big reason why we've seen them really double down on the vehicle stop strategy.

But these are inherently dangerous encounters. And if you have officers who are untrained, who are not following their training, or jumpy, or too quick to use force, for whatever reason, you can get these very dangerous situations and fatal shootings. And so, there have been at least 20 fatal shoot-- not fatal shootings, but 20 shooting incidents involving Immigration officers since Trump took office. And we know about the two most recent.

NINA MOINI: Just lastly, Nick. I know you have sources inside of DHS. How are they talking with you about how things have shifted, especially as we get closer to the midterm elections?

NICK MIROFF: You know, I would say on the whole, people are generally pleased with the direction under Mullin. They feel like things have calmed down a little bit. And I'm speaking more before these most recent fatal shooting incidents in which ICE took another public relations hit. But, on the whole, the Kristi Noem era was very stressful, was very chaotic. There wasn't a lot of confidence in her leadership. They ran things in a very kind of micro-managerial way.

And so some of the management changes that Mullin has brought in, I think, have been welcomed by DHS personnel. But again, the power all resides in the White House. Stephen Miller is still in the driver's seat in terms of where Trump's mass deportation campaign is going to go. And Tom Homan is there kind of remaining as their main public messenger. So there's limited amount of power at the Department of Homeland Security and at ICE itself. And so, for as long as that remains the case, there's going to be this kind of policy whiplash for rank and file officers.

NINA MOINI: Nick, thanks for coming on *Minnesota Now* and sharing your reporting with us. We really appreciate it.

NICK MIROFF: Anytime.

NINA MOINI: Nick Miroff is a reporter covering Immigration and the Department of Homeland Security for *The Atlantic*. And Friday marks six months since the killing of Alex Pretti. Tomorrow on the program, listen to conversations I had with business owners whose storefronts are near the site where he was killed, that has continued to be a memorial.