

# The Precarious Nexus of Technology, Human Rights and Migration: The Case of the CBP One App

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## Introduction

Nowadays, information and communication technologies are an integral part of everyday people's lives worldwide. The widespread use of smartphones, which began in the first decade of the 21st century, marked a watershed, accelerating the sharing and access to information of all kinds on the go. Migrants the world over have taken advantage of the technological tools that smartphones offer, such as social media and messaging applications. Its use changed how migrants find information, plan their journeys, make decisions, and stay in touch with family and friends. Government agencies have also leveraged this technology for border and migration management. One example is "CPB One," the mobile application launched by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in October 2020.

Initially designed as a single portal for the public to access services already offered on paper, primarily for use by cargo carriers and international travelers, the app underwent various changes over the following years. The most significant change was the introduction of a feature in January 2023 that allowed asylum seekers arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border to schedule appointments. By January 20, 2025, CBP shut down the app, leaving thousands of asylum seekers who had scheduled appointments through the app in limbo. On March 12, 2025, CBP relaunched the app as "CPB Home," which includes a new function that allows immigrants who applied via CBP One and were granted humanitarian parole to self-deport.

In less than five years, the CBP One app underwent significant changes, underscoring how politically motivated decisions can rapidly transform technology from a tool for advancing human rights into one that hinders them. Praised by some and condemned by others, the CBP One app — now CBP Home — has emerged as a powerful tool that has been used by the politically powerful to accomplish diametrically opposite ends.

This essay examines how the rapidly changing, short-lived "CBP One" app reveals the multifaceted relationship between technology, migration, and human rights. More broadly, the essay explores how technologies have changed the way the U.S. government manages migration. As with other aspects of life, human migration, historically shaped by economic, political, and social factors, has also been impacted by the use of technology, becoming more intertwined.

## Problem Statement and Structure

Technology enables human rights advocates to advance human rights, but unfortunately, it also offers government agencies and private organizations an opportunity to decimate human rights, as is the case with the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). CBP launched its “CBP One” digital application in its first attempt to technologize and facilitate various services, including the flow of goods and individuals into the U.S. The app was turned rapidly into a tool for border and immigration management and underwent various iterations due to limitations in its original design. Use of the app was also affected by constant changes in migration policies, all of which hampered its effective implementation, impacting the most vulnerable: migrants seeking asylum.

This essay analyzes the evolution of the CBP One application from its launch in October 2020 to its discontinuation in January 2025, tracing its impact on border management and asylum seekers, as well as how it keeps evolving. This project delves into what went wrong with the app's implementation. In this sense, the CBP One app serves as a case study to understand the multifaceted relationship between technology, migration, and human rights, including how the app's use affected and was affected by technology changes, migration policies, and asylum seekers. The essay answers the question, what was the role of the CBP One mobile application implemented to manage asylum seeking during the period from 2020 to 2025? More broadly, it explores how the same technology can be deployed to both advance and hinder the attainment of human rights. The essay is structured into the following four sections:

**The Technology, Human Rights, and Migration section** briefly describes the intersection of Information and Communications Technology, human rights and migration, its virtues and challenges, its processes, and its legal framework. It also details how advocacy organizations, government agencies, and private companies use technology to their advantage, and how the use of smartphones before, during, and after the journey provides migrants benefits and challenges. **The Case Study chapter** expands on the app's origins and how constant changes in migration policies and malfunctions impacted the deployment of the app and its use by both the U.S. government and asylum seekers. It briefly describes how the CBP One app disrupted the U.S.

immigration system and how government entities responded. A timeline of the app gives readers a snapshot of the app's evolution. The timeline can be found in Annex A. **The Discussion section** answers the main research question: What was the role of the CBP One mobile app implemented by the U.S. to manage asylum seeking during 2020-2025? Furthermore, it explores how technology advanced and hindered human rights. **The Conclusions chapter** reflects on the complex relationship between technology, migration, and human rights.

## Technology, Human Rights, and Migration

According to the 2025 Global Digital Report (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2025), as of February 2025, more than 5.78 billion people were using the internet and mobile applications to access all kinds of information through smartphones, representing 70.5% of the estimated world population (8.20 billion). Remarkably, over the past two decades, social media platforms and messaging applications like YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram -the top five used applications worldwide- have reconfigured how people connect locally and globally (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2025). As technology transforms the world, it brings opportunities and challenges for human rights. Opportunities such as facilitating freedom of expression, access to information, and economic freedom can empower migrants and advocacy organizations. At the same time, government agencies and private companies can use technologies for control and surveillance, which threatens privacy and amplifies inequalities (Arya et al., 2022).

The emergence of new technologies, defined as "technological innovations that transform the boundaries between virtual, physical, and biological spaces," has changed migration dynamics and migration-related decision-making (UN Human Rights Council, 2021). Technologies and techniques for datafication (the process of transforming subjects, objects, and practices into digital data), data distribution, automated decision-making (A.I.), and networks of connected physical devices and software (the Internet of Things and blockchain technology), among others, create both new opportunities and risks for all involved in human rights protection. The right to migrate is stated in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Refugee Convention, the Migrant Workers Convention, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. All these declarations, conventions and agendas call on countries to

facilitate safe and orderly migration. So, the key is finding the right technological tools to advance human rights, including the right to migrate (Land & Aronson, 2020; McPherson, 2015; UN Human Rights Council, 2021).

The first international instrument establishing a framework for states and businesses to prevent and address human rights abuses as part of business operations was the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, enacted in 2011. The guide is an essential framework for preventing, addressing, and accounting for adverse human rights impacts of tech business activities, such as social media and messaging applications used by migrants. One of the novelties of the UN Guiding Principles is that victims of human rights abuses could, at least on paper, access effective remedies through judicial and non-judicial grievance mechanisms. However, as new technologies evolve constantly, tech companies are not necessarily adopting responsible business practices to protect human rights (Business for Social Responsibility, 2018; Land, 2020).

Several other international legal agreements on the use of technology exist to protect fundamental human rights. Some examples include Europe's General Data Protection Regulation, enacted in 2018 to give individuals more control over their data and impose strict obligations on tech businesses that collect and process personal data, and the No Facial Recognition in Body-Worn Camera Act enacted in 2019 by the U.S. to ban the deployment of facial recognition technology by federal law enforcement agencies. In the last two decades, governments started transferring greater responsibility in regulating online activities to tech companies -which are not traditionally bound by human rights law- creating a scenario where tech companies ought to have a moral responsibility to respect and protect human rights but actually operate without any binding obligations.

### **Technology at Migrants' Fingertips**

Even before the first generation of cellular phones arrived, migrants had been logging onto the internet to access information about migration processes and requirements, as well as communicating with family through emails. Nowadays, smartphones are the preferred tech tool of migrants to help them keep in touch with family and fellow migrants, get information about asylum procedures, stay up-to-date with the ever-changing policies at the border, translate information and legal documentation, navigate routes, inform others of potential risks and

dangerous routes, connect with diaspora communities in destination countries, follow the news, triangulate the veracity of information, make monetary transactions, and even find reliable smugglers/avoid police.

Smartphones have become a critical tool for migrants. Apps like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have empowered them, and now, more than ever, they have control of their journeys. Although access to technology and media savviness vary widely based on income and education levels, migrants have been using technology at their fingertips to their advantage, including before, during, and after their journey (Kaplan, 2018; Frouws & Brenner, 2019; Unwin, 2022).

Before embarking on their journeys, smartphones are a valuable resource for people wanting information about immigration processes, the destination country, logistics, legal and human rights information, and even contact pro bono lawyers. Connecting with diaspora communities for advice and support has also been a critical source of information for migrants, enabling them to make informed decisions.

During transit, real-time communication and access to information play an even more crucial role due to the unfamiliar and often hostile environments migrants must go through to get to their destination; navigation and wayfinding apps can be lifesaving for migrants during their journey. Popular social media and messaging apps provide a way to communicate with family, enable them to coordinate with fellow migrants, and serve as support networks. Migrants also use the apps to share resources and information about checkpoints, shelters, safe houses, translation, and transportation options. During a crisis, migrants can also use smartphones for emergency calls. Migrants have even used social media to document their journeys, raising awareness about their plight and potentially attracting international attention.

Once in the host country, smartphone apps provided migrants with information about easier integration into a new society by facilitating language learning, offering information about job opportunities, and supporting organizations providing access to social services and healthcare. Smartphones also give migrants an easy way to send money home (Frouws & Brenner, 2019).

The use of technology comes with caveats, particularly for migrants seeking asylum because the web is plagued with misinformation and disinformation spread through unofficial

channels daily. Smugglers and human traffickers exploit these gaps, becoming a big challenge for migrants to sort out. Language accessibility is another challenge for migrants who only speak their native languages, making it one of the many roots of exclusion, including in digital literacy and internet accessibility. Social media applications often leave digital traces, making migrants susceptible to surveillance by state and private actors, including criminal groups. All of these issues, among others, make migrants even more vulnerable and exposed, further marginalizing already vulnerable populations and limiting their human rights, as well as their opportunities for integration and advancement (Alencar et al., 2018; Kaplan, 2018).

### **Technology Designed to Support and Undermine Human Rights**

Aware of the potential new technologies could bring to migration management, the public and private sectors, including humanitarian and development agencies, increased their experimentation with its use to streamline processes, predict the movement of migrant populations, track people before, during, and after their journeys, detect deception, and even promote dissuasion campaigns (Molnar, 2019). Mobile applications to assist migrants before, during, and after their journey, and especially for asylum seekers, have been developed by public and private companies for at least two decades. Some apps have been short-lived because they did not gain much traction among the migrants. An example is the InfoAid app, launched in 2015 by Migration Aid in Hungary for migrants traveling to Europe. By 2017, the app was no longer live. Some other apps designed to provide information, advice, and support have been successful. Examples include the MigApp, developed in 2017 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a country-based app offering information on international migration and even money transfers. Apps targeting particular populations include RedSafe, which provides information on humanitarian services offered by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Shuva Yatra, developed by The Asia Foundation, to provide Nepali migrant workers with tools to plan a safer journey and work abroad. An example of an app designed to assist asylees in their host country is easyRights, developed by the European Horizon 2020 project to address the challenge of migrant integration through IT-enabled solutions. EasyRights combines intelligent language-oriented technologies for migrants to understand better and access the services to which asylees in Greece are entitled (Unwin, 2022; Nikolopoulou & Gavrilut, 2023).



Some examples of technology used by law enforcement, development organizations, and advocacy groups worldwide include the deployment of a pilot AI-empowered lie detectors at various airport border checkpoints in Europe, the use of algorithms and GPS technology to track immigrants on parole by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE, and the forced collection of biometric data (iris scanning) of refugees by UN agencies in Jordan, Bangladesh, and Syria trying to access to food. Advocacy groups use technology to share information about asylum processes, offer legal advice, and use social media to raise awareness of human rights abuse.

Out of necessity, government agencies overseeing asylum petitions have developed apps to streamline registration and processing that were previously held back by limited staff and infrastructure. The first wave of digital experimentation happened in Europe during the 2015–16 migration and refugee crisis when the Common European Asylum System underwent a significant update to transform the asylum process into a more efficient, fair, and humane system. The second wave exploded worldwide, including in the U.S., during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, U.S. authorities experimented with online registration forms, employed mobile applications to schedule appointments and submit biometric information, and deployed chatbots to assist asylum seekers as they self-registered (Molnar, 2019; Beirens, 2022).

## **The CBP One App**

### **Background**

The U.S.-Mexico border is in constant transformation. The physical borderline as we know it today took shape after the Mexican-American War. The two decisive actions were signing the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 and the 1853 Gadsden Purchase. The final demarcation occurred in 1970 under the Boundary Treaty. Over two centuries, historical forces, economic realities, and political dynamics have shaped today's complex and contentious relationship between the U.S. and Mexico (International Boundary and Water Commission, n.d.).

Beyond the physical border, the lives and livelihoods of millions of U.S. and Mexico citizens are impacted by daily commercial, cultural, and educational exchange, including a total two-way goods trade at \$807 billion in 2023, and 40+ million pedestrians, 76+ million personal

vehicles, 7+ million trucks *en route* to the U.S. from Mexico in 2023, and without considering millions of people, personal cars, and trucks traveling from the U.S. to Mexico (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

One of the biggest challenges faced by the U.S. and Mexico, particularly during the last 45 years, has been the flow of drugs and undocumented people seeking economic opportunities, escaping violence, or seeking asylum, making border security a key policy subject and a divisive political issue. Two main events have changed the landscape of border security in the last four decades: the September 11 attacks in 2001 and the shift of migration patterns in the early 2010s.

The September 11 attacks brought a change in the border security approach through the application of a three-tiered resourcing strategy of personnel, infrastructure, and technology. Aimed at protecting national security, particularly against terrorist attacks, but also to respond to large-scale emergencies, the Bush administration signed the Homeland Security Act in 2002. The Homeland Security Act enabled the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and established the Border and Transportation Security (now Border Security) directorate. In January 2003, the U.S. government created the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to handle border management; the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as the investigative arm; and the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to handle all forms and processes related to immigration and naturalization. All are under the Border Security directorate.

In September 2003, DHS announced the One Face at the Border (OFAB) initiative to merge under one roof three types of inspections at land, sea, and air ports of entry: immigration, to ensure that the person had valid documentation and was legally entering the U.S.; customs, to ensure the legality of the goods being brought into the U.S.; and agriculture, to ensure the lawfulness and health of plants and farm products being transported across the border (Bersin et al., 2024; Meyer, 2005).

### **Using Technology to Tighten the Border**

The recently created DHS prioritized the deployment of advanced technology to secure the border. It included surveillance towers, drones, sensors, cameras, infrared devices, and biometric identity systems, most of which were initially developed for military use or handed over from the U.S. Department of Defense. These technologies, along with the construction of

physical barriers such as walls and fences and a significant increase in border protection personnel, became the agency's preferred tools for tackling drug trafficking, terrorism, and unauthorized immigration. Consequently, Customs and Border Protection became the largest enforcement agency in the U.S. (\$20+ billion in FY 2023) and one of the largest law enforcement agencies in the world, taking a more significant role in border surveillance (Chishti & Bolter, 2021).

Migration patterns are constantly changing. Around 2014, the pattern of migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border changed drastically. It went from the arrival of Mexican adult males seeking job opportunities to the arrival of Central American families and unaccompanied children, and migrants from South America, Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia fleeing violence and seeking asylum (Chishti & Bolter, 2021; Bersin et al., 2024).

As migration patterns were shifting, border control operations that had previously been effective in seizing drugs and apprehending traffickers and quickly expediting undocumented migrants began to lose their effectiveness. These measures were no longer helpful in controlling the vast number of people arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border claiming humanitarian protection. The shift prompted an increase in the use of technology to process asylum claims of families and unaccompanied children arriving at the border, including the deployment of new screening systems and interoperable databases.

Under the Trump Administration's Alternatives to Detention program in 2018, ICE launched SmartLINK to monitor low-risk migrants during conditional release. ICE presented the new app as a humane alternative to ankle monitors and sending people to detention centers. ICE monitored fewer than 6,000 people in September 2019, after which use of the smartphone-based app exploded, reaching more than 230,000 in June 2020, resulting in more than 80 percent of all individuals under conditional release being monitored. Through SmartLINK, ICE tracked migrants' locations using GPS data and confirmed their identity through facial recognition software (Kocher, 2023).

ICE also started using an Artificial Intelligence tool, the Hurricane Score algorithm, to assess the risk of an individual waiting for a court proceeding of absconding from the agency's supervision. The agency declared that it uses the algorithm, ranking individuals from 1 to 5, only

to inform decisions regarding an individual's detention, deportation, or surveillance (Parvini, et al., 2024).

### **The Launching of the CBP One App**

During its first term, the Trump administration reduced humanitarian protections, tightened border controls, and intensified enforcement, effectively reshaping the U.S. immigration system. Trump signed 472 immigration-related executive actions designed to reduce arrivals. Some of which include the 2017 proclamation for Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States barring nearly all travelers from five (mainly Muslim) countries, as well as North Korea and Venezuela from entering the U.S. Others include the Zero-Tolerance policy sought to prosecute all individuals entering the country without permission that led to the systematic and forcible separation of thousands of migrant children from their families and implementing the Migrant Protection Protocols in 2019, forcing asylum seekers arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border to remain in Mexico, often in precarious conditions, while awaiting their court hearings. Other significant measures included the 2019 declaration of a national emergency to increase funding for the border wall, accelerating the construction of fences along the U.S.-Mexico border.

In July 2019, the Third-Country Transit Bar or Asylum Ban, as it is commonly known, went into effect. The ban states that migrants looking for asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border must prove one of the following: (1) that they applied for but were denied asylum in a country of transit; (2) that they are victims of severe forms of trafficking; or (3) that they did not pass through any country that is a signatory to the Refugee Convention, Refugee Protocol, or Committee Against Torture, CAT. Since Mexico is a party to the Refugee Convention and CAT, any migrant arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border looking for asylum needs to meet the first or second criteria to be eligible for asylum in the U.S. Although the rule was ruled illegal by a federal judge in June 2020, less than a year after its implementation, it affected thousands of petitioners (Bryan, S. & Wilner, R., 2020).

In March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) invoked Title 42, a public health measure dating back to 1944, to avoid holding migrants in crowded immigration facilities and spreading the disease. Nearly 3 million migrants were prevented from entering the U.S. and applying for asylum under Title 42 between

March 2020 and January 2023, when the Biden administration ended it (Congressional Research Service, 2023; Gil, 2024, Boundless, n.d.).

In October 2020, the Trump administration launched the CBP One mobile application. CBP developed the app as a first step in reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies and streamlining border processes for individuals and companies engaging with the immigration and trading business system already provided by the agency. The app enabled scheduling appointments, submitting documentation, and tracking applications for international travelers applying for an I-94 form<sup>1</sup> and submitting documentation for cargo carriers to schedule appointments for the inspection of perishable items (Congressional Research Service, 2023). The app became essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering a contactless way to manage border traffic.

Biden reversed several of the Trump-era immigration policies, including ending the travel ban, halting border wall construction, and made various efforts to end the Remain in Mexico policy, when he took office in January 2021. In January 2023, the Biden administration announced a new function of the CBP One app: people looking for asylum in the U.S. could schedule an appointment using the app before presenting themselves at the U.S.-Mexico border. In this sense, the expansion of the CBP One app represented a shift in the app's focus from commercial and logistical uses to facilitating humanitarian migration procedures (Boundless, n.d.).

### **CBP One Expands its Functionality**

In May 2023, and in preparation for the ending of Title 42, DHS and the Department of Justice issued the Circumvention of Lawful Pathways Final Rule designed to discourage irregular migration and incentivize migrants looking for asylum to use what the Biden administration called "lawful pathways." The Asylum Ban rule, as human rights advocates called it, encouraged migrants to use lawful, safe, and orderly processes for entering the U.S., meaning using the CBP One app and imposing conditions on their eligibility for asylum for individuals who fail to do so. This created a *de facto* ban for those who were not able to schedule an appointment through the app.

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<sup>1</sup> The Form I-94 or Arrival-Departure Record Card, issued by CBP and aimed at tracking the arrival and departure of U.S. visitors, is a requirement for all individuals entering the U.S. except U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents and most Canadian citizens visiting or in transit. Foreign visitors arriving on a land port of entry at the U.S.-Mexico border needed to fill in a printed version of the form before the launching of the CBP One app.

Included in the Lawful Pathways Rule was what CBP called the rebuttable presumption of ineligibility for asylum unless the individual is a) granted parole before their arrival to the border, b) presented themselves at a port of entry after scheduling an appointment -only eight out of 40+ land ports of entry in the U.S.-Mexico border were authorized to receive individuals with appointments, or c) sought asylum or other protection in a country they traveled through and received a final denial<sup>2</sup>. In 2023, DHS expanded a parole program established in October 2022 originally designed for citizens and nationals of Cuba to include citizens and nationals of Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (CHNV) looking for asylum to schedule an appointment from their home country through the app<sup>3</sup>.

After securing an appointment, migrants would be interviewed and released into the country (unlike individuals entering the country unlawfully who would be immediately deported). Once in the U.S., asylum seekers could apply for a work permit while waiting for their court date. In this sense, CBP would process asylum seekers under the humanitarian parole authority and undergo national security and public safety checks. It was not until their court date, typically taking years, that asylum seekers would provide the information required to satisfy conditions qualifying them for asylum and for the authorities to decide on their case.

During FY 2023, the number of people presenting themselves to the authorities once they crossed the border grew beyond the asylum system's capacity, reaching 2.5 million, prompting the release of potential asylees into the U.S. with waiting times for a court date of up to a few years (Chishti et al., 2024). In June 2024, the Biden administration issued an executive order summarily halting asylum claims at the U.S.-Mexico border once the number of apprehensions at the border exceeded 2,500 individuals per day, with the restriction remaining in effect until the daily encounters would fall to a seven-day average of 1,500 apprehensions or less (Kim et.al., 2025).

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<sup>2</sup> In 2023, the Biden administration ruled that migrants looking for asylum should avail themselves of lawful, safe, and orderly pathways into the United States, or otherwise to seek asylum or other protection in another country through which they travel, to reduce their reliance on human smuggling networks that exploit them for financial gain. The rule, which mandated migrants to use the CBP One app to apply for asylum or otherwise be denied their petition, was deemed a travel ban by human rights advocates similar to the one enacted by Trump in 2019 (Gilman, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> The parole processes established for citizens and nationals of Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (CHNV) allowed individuals with U.S.-based supporters to seek parole into the United States on a case-by-case basis for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit. The parolees were allowed to remain in the United States temporarily and permitted to apply for employment authorization to allow them to work in the United States.

While all of these shifting in policies were happening, the app became a decisive effort to establish controlled pathways for asylum seekers while limiting unauthorized border crossings. Also, the app shifted from being one of many options for migrants to apply for asylum to being the only option, effectively turning the app into a digital border (Kocher, 2023). While some saw the mandatory use of the CBP One app as a tool to restrict asylum access, others saw it as a more humane, fast-track way to enter the U.S. while waiting for an audience (Congressional Research Service, 2023; Gil, 2024). All of these changes and constraints generated a lot of controversy among human rights advocates and confusion among asylum seekers and other migrants.

### **Challenges of the CBP One app**

The promise of an improved, accessible, and efficient asylum process using a smartphone transformed into a disaster. The debate around the CBP One app's use was rampant with people on both sides of the aisle, those who supported it and those who didn't. Discussion around the app's challenges fall into five topics: Language barriers, limited availability of appointments, privacy and data security concerns, technical glitches and overreliance on technology, and digital divide.

*Language barriers.* Initially, CBP launched the app in English and Spanish; later adding Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Russian. However, the app remains inaccessible to others, particularly Indigenous people who only speak their native languages. In addition to language, the use of technical jargon in the app increased the difficulties in fully understanding how to submit accurate information. The app was also inaccessible to migrants with disabilities, including blind and deaf individuals, and people with mobility impairments or intellectual disabilities. All of the above meant that some migrants could not complete the application independently and needed assistance from either fellow migrants or human rights organizations supporting the effort.

*Limited availability of appointments.* The application restricted the number of available daily appointments. When the app functionality was expanded to include the scheduling of appointments for migrants seeking asylum in January 2023, the app would distribute 1,000 appointments per day. The system forced asylum seekers to wait in Mexico for extended periods, usually in unsafe and unhealthy conditions, constituting a big challenge for those needing urgent



protection. After much criticism and a surge of migrants, in June 2023 CBP increased the number of appointments to 1,450 per day. However, delays, logistical and technical issues remained. For example, the app wouldn't save information until the appointment was scheduled, so individuals who failed to get an appointment needed to initiate the whole process again the next day. Of the 40+ land ports of entry on the US-Mexico border, only eight (San Ysidro, Calexico, Nogales, El Paso, Eagle Pass, Laredo, Hidalgo, and Brownsville) processed appointments. Appointments were offered 21 days in advance, and the number of available appointments varied depending on the port of entry's resources and infrastructure. Thus, some individuals needed to wait in Mexico for at least 21 days (though some needed to wait much longer). And astonishingly, 70% of the appointments *were allocated randomly* instead of in order of submission, leaving migrants who have been waiting in Mexico the longest with financial stress and mental health issues.

*Privacy and data security concerns.* The app collected applicants' personal, biometric (facial features), and geolocation data while scheduling an appointment. This information, which otherwise would have been collected during primary and/or secondary personal inspection at a port of entry, had to be submitted in advance as a requirement to schedule an appointment, raising concerns about privacy. Advocacy organizations worried that potential leaks of sensitive information could affect individuals fleeing persecution, particularly if foreign governments were involved. Also, the CBP initially designed the app so that users could [only?] access it close to the U.S. border in northern Mexico using the individuals' phone to determine GPS location. In subsequent iterations of the app, this GPS location feature was extended to central and southern Mexico, which meant that the app could track users' movements. Individuals from countries under Title 42 exceptions (Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela) could use the app to schedule an appointment from their home countries. In short, although the app's enhanced capabilities benefited asylum seekers who were able to schedule appointments in advance and verify their identities before meeting with an immigration officer were a big jump in the advancement of the migration process, the tracking and potential for leaking of individuals' sensitive information was extremely concerning and potentially increasing threats for the already endangered.

*Technical glitches and overreliance on technology.* From the moment CBP launched the app there were constant glitches, including app crashes, malfunctions in scheduling



appointments, and errors in submitting data. In addition to criticizing language access, human rights advocates condemned the app for its difficulty in recognizing the facial features of Black asylum applicants which made them unable to present a claim to the U.S. authorities. It effectively exacerbated their level of vulnerability. Also, when the app was the only option to submit an asylum petition, individuals who were not tech-savvy and faced challenges such as literacy barriers had to rely on help from human rights advocacy organizations. CBP did not design the app with potential users in mind, so older adults and individuals with disabilities were also excluded from using the app independently.

Overreliance on technology created a system without human contact, and just as ICE used the Hurricane Score, it raised concerns that automated decision-making processes would take over a more humane approach of face-to-face interviews. Humane interactions are particularly critical for migrants who suffered trauma at home and even during their journey to the border.

In addition, malfunctions while uploading information caused applicants to try several times before getting an appointment, inflating the number of requests against the number of unique individuals applying by as much as 35 to one.

*Digital divide.* Most migrants and asylum seekers use smartphones during their journey to the U.S.-Mexico border. Sometimes the phones wouldn't support the installation of the CBP One app. Access to a stable internet connection in remote and even urban border areas was also a problem as the app would crash when attempting to submit information or using the facial recognition feature. For individuals fleeing persecution, conflict, or poverty, acquiring and maintaining the technology required to use CBP One was inordinately expensive.

All of the above challenges hindered the ability of some migrants--particularly those seeking asylum--to access the app, which denied them the opportunity to submit a claim. Human rights advocates saw this as a *de facto* virtual asylum ban. Despite all the foregoing, the app was considered a success in terms of providing a more orderly (if not just) way to process the thousands of migrants reaching the border. By the time Trump shut down the app on the first day of his second administration on January 20, 2025, more than 936,500 individuals had successfully scheduled appointments when CBP launched the app to receive asylum applications (January 2023-January 2025). In addition, the Department of Homeland Security processed

531,690 individuals from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela through the Advance Travel Authorizations parole program and 600,000+ from other programs, including Uniting for Ukraine, Operation Allies Welcome, and migrants crossing the U.S.-Canada border (Chishti et al., 2024; U.S. CBP, 2025c, 2025d).

### **Shutting Down the CBP One App**

The Trump administration assessed the number of migrants entering the U.S. through the various programs as an "invasion," prompting a declaration of a National Emergency at the Southern Border and enacting the American People Against Invasion executive order in January 2025. The national emergency brought a slew of executive orders issued to reverse most of Biden's immigration policies, including a new travel ban, mass deportations, reinstating the Remain-in-Mexico policy, changes to the asylum rules, and even ending birthright citizenship guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. These orders are being challenged in courts across the U.S., including SCOTUS.

On its first day in office, Trump ordered the CBP One app to be shut down. The first to be affected were thousands of migrants who had scheduled an appointment for an asylum interview through the app, which was no longer valid, sending them into despair<sup>4</sup>. Advocacy organizations went into turmoil (Perlmutter, 2025; Watson & Janetsky, 2025). Immediately after, in February, CBP revamped the app and launched it under the name CBP Go, scrapping the migrant asylum appointment feature but leaving the scheduling of appointments and submitting paperwork for cargo inspections and international tourists intact. Less than a month later, in March, CBP launched a new app version, renaming it CBP Home, to assist individuals in the U.S. without legal documentation to facilitate self-deportation (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2025c; 2025 d).

The new CBP Home app lets individuals inform the authorities of their intentions to depart voluntarily from the U.S. The controversy raised by advocacy groups is that the authority promises individuals who self-deport using the CBP Home the possibility of later re- entering the

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<sup>4</sup> During the period when CBP One was available for migrants seeking asylum to schedule an appointment, from January 2023 through January 2025, approximately 936,500 individuals were able to do so. Of those, CBP interviewed and screened 919,000 individuals who were successfully allowed into the U.S. The rest, some 17,500 persons, were left in limbo without a clear answer of the status of their appointments.

U.S. via a program similar to the years-long Voluntary Departure program, although it is not guaranteed. The latter means that when self-deported, migrants will not risk carrying a penalty comparable to those deported by the authorities of a five-to-ten-year or even a lifetime ban for re-entering the U.S. Although self-deportation is not a new idea, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement implemented a pilot program in 2008 for migrants to schedule their departures; what makes CBP Home controversial is the data sharing via CBP One. As such, CBP already has personal information, biometric data, and even the location of individuals they can potentially deport (Arizona News, 2025; Dale Leal, 2025). Annex A shows a timeline for the CBP One app.

By April 2025, news stories revealed the Trump administration was purposely using data collected via the CBP One app to the detriment of people legally in the U.S. through the humanitarian parole program that had been expanded during the Biden administration. Day after day, hundreds of thousands of immigrants legally in the U.S. through various programs receive news of their legal status being revoked and being classified as dead by Social Security in an attempt to curtail them from the opportunity to work so they would decide to self-deport.

The cancellation of paroles granted during the Biden administration affected more than 900,000 immigrants who used the CBP One app to enter the U.S. legally. Others affected include more than 500,000 people from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela who entered the U.S. legally via a financial sponsor and were given a temporary work permit, and more than 600,000 from countries considered unsafe to return to who entered the U.S. legally via Temporary Protected Status and who were given 18-month increments permits to stay in the country. Ukrainians fleeing war are being exempted from this rule (Gonzalez, 2025; Weissert & Hussein, 2025).

Beyond curtailing migrants' asylum rights, the Trump administration is taking a hard line on any immigrant in the U.S. In January 2025, the Refugee Admissions Program was suspended, affecting more than 10,000 refugees who had already been vetted and were waiting for resettlement. The latter was done under the Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program established in January 2025 (U.S.C.R.I., 2025). In April 2025, the Trump administration stripped Social Security numbers from more than 6,000 immigrants, affecting their ability to work and access their bank accounts and other services so as to pressure them to

self-deport. Also, in April 2025, citing the Alien Registration Act from 1940, the U.S. DHS mandated all unregistered immigrants to register with the U.S. government under penalty of a monetary fine and prison time if they did not comply. Tens of thousands of Afghans and Cameroonians have lost their Temporary Protected Status. International students who have participated in campus protests have seen their visas revoked (Ma, 2025; Aleaziz, 2025).

Recently, news emerged that ICE is looking to develop systematized software to facilitate deportations. As recently as April 21, 2025, the DHS has contracted Palantir for a \$30 million deal to create a prototype by September 2025. The deportation system will bring together data from different sources that Palantir has access to from previous federal contracts dated as far as 2011 to provide an interface that will make it easier for ICE to remove individuals living in the U.S. The system is called the Immigration Lifecycle Operating System, or ImmigrationOS. ImmigrationOS relies on AI to a) gather data from SSA, IRS, USCIS, DHS, and FBI, among others; b) analyze biographical and biometric information; c) identify criminal gang members, violent offenders, migrants looking to self-deport, and individuals who overstay their work or tourist visas; and d) produce a list of targeted individuals that ICE can use to find them, detain and quickly deport. ICE will integrate its ATrac (Alien Tracker) system, which is used to locate targeted individuals geospatially, into ImmigrationOS to track and feed the database with information about whether the individuals were arrested, located but not detained, or never found. Without proper monitoring from human rights advocacy groups, ImmigrationOS could turn its massive data repository into a mega-deporting human rights-violation government machine (Kimery, 2025; Limon, 2025).

Immigration management has increasingly meant securitization over the last 25 years. Both the G.W. Bush and Biden administrations ramped up border security in the last stretch of their term in an attempt to silence their immigration policies' critiques, and Obama was dubbed the Deporter in Chief by advocacy organizations, even given his higher refugee admissions goals. Indeed, the foregoing review has shown that using cutting-edge technologies in border management, particularly for processing asylum applications (the deployment of the CBP One app), has actually suppressed asylum seekers' rights.

## Discussion

The answer to the question: What has been the role of the CBP One mobile application implemented by the U.S. DHS in managing the asylum system during 2020-2025, is that the U.S. government has used the CBP One app to initially promote human rights, but its use protocols quickly turned into hindering human rights. During the Biden administration, the app was used to assist migrants in streamlining their immigration process. But during the second Trump administration, it has quickly turned against them.

Undeniably, technology deployment is not inherently good or evil, but the policies, and in this case, the immigration policies behind the technology, dictate its use. The Biden administration intended to use the app to benefit migrants, with mixed results. Hundreds of thousands processed through the app were released in the country with a permit to work while waiting for a court date. To the opposite effect, the various executive actions on immigration that Trump issued on day one of his second term have the explicit goal of upending the U.S. immigration system. The features of the now-renamed CBP Home have implications beyond the undocumented, creating an environment of fear among all immigrants.

Despite its failures, the CBP One app facilitated the processing of hundreds of thousands of migrants who could schedule an appointment at a limited number but secured land ports of entry. Families arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border were also processed as a unit using the app, keeping them together during the asylum process. The app eliminated the barricading of large numbers of migrants at a border crossing waiting in line for a turn to enter the U.S. and submit a claim, which at the time created confusion, the selling of turns, and longer wait times. The app encouraged more asylum seekers to use this method instead of presenting themselves to the authorities or relying on smugglers to enter the U.S.

Nevertheless, the use of the CBP One app reinforced human rights violations by a) restricting asylum access because the app was the only method to request an appointment, which creates a *de facto* digital barrier, b) forcing migrants to wait for several weeks, even months, in precarious conditions exposing them to violence and exploitation, c) excluding vulnerable populations such as Indigenous individuals and persons with disabilities for whom was difficult accessing the app, d) risking potential exploitation of sensitive data collected through the app, and e) complicating the process for individuals in need of urgent response, such those fleeing

violence. All of the above violate international asylum agreements that guarantee the right to seek protection without preconditions.

This case study of the CBP One app highlights the tension at the intersection of technology, migration, and human rights: digital tools can both uphold and violate human rights depending on their governance. The use of digital tools for managing migration has increased exponentially in recent years, and with the adoption of new technologies such as AI, it will continue to grow. However, it is critical to understand that in the highly politicized landscape of asylum policy, as is true of the U.S.-Mexico border, the lives of hundreds of thousands are in peril. As of today, many immigrants, legally in the U.S. and undocumented, are grappling with the uncertainty of their status and facing the potential for deportation.

More broadly, the relationship between technology, human rights, and migration is complex and evolving, supporting and curbing human rights with positive and negative impacts for all but more consequential for the most vulnerable migrants, those seeking asylum.

Some takeaways from this case study are:

- **Technology empowers migrants:** Smartphones and apps deployed worldwide help migrants access legal aid, stay connected, navigate routes, and access basic services. CBP One helped hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers to solicit an appointment in an if not perfect--more orderly way.
- **Technology also hinders human rights:** Some mobile apps have contributed to human rights violations by limiting access, excluding vulnerable populations, and enabling surveillance. This is also true for the CBP One app, which excluded Indigenous individuals who only speak their Native languages and enabled exponential increase in surveillance of asylum seekers.
- **Politics matter:** The function and impact of the CBP One app shifted significantly under different presidential administrations. Initially aimed at facilitating border entry, the app became the sole means of applying for asylum and is now being used to decimate the privacy rights of the hundreds of thousands who used the CBP One app.
- **Technology is not neutral:** Technological tools designed to assist can also be used to monitor, exclude, or penalize migrants, depending on how they are deployed.

- **Technology can have a dehumanizing effect.** The technologization of migration systems is dehumanizing due to the lack of actual human contact, whether face-to-face or by phone, during the migration application process, reducing asylum seekers, individuals with extremely complicated life stories, to algorithms and digital representations.
- **There is an urgent need for safeguards:** Rights-based frameworks must guide the design and deployment of migration technologies to prevent abuse and exclusion.

## Conclusions

From its launch in 2020 as a contactless mechanism to facilitate cargo inspections and the entry of international tourists, to its expansion in 2023 to include the ability for migrants seeking asylum to schedule an appointment, to its shutdown in 2025 and its eventual transformation into CBP Home in March 2025, the CBP One app impacted the U.S. migration and asylum systems in various ways.

When the U.S. DHS launched the app, it represented a critical shift toward a more technologized border management. But its failures highlight the broader challenges of U.S. immigration policies, including political shifts, security concerns, and humanitarian obligations. The U.S. government should prioritize human rights-upholding policies, aligning with post-WWII refugee and asylum agreements.

In a few years, we have seen both the promise and the peril of digital solutions for meeting humanitarian obligations. The most unfortunate revealing aspect of the CBP app is the loss of human connection during specific steps of the asylum process. In the name of a more systemic and standardized immigration process, the immigration system has a less humanitarian response to asylum petitions.

The development and uses of the CBP app reveal the complexity and fragility of the intersection between technology, migration, and human rights. Its implementation raised concerns about fairness, accessibility, security, privacy, and the very nature of what an asylum policy in the digital age should look like. In this sense, tools like the CBP app cannot replace comprehensive immigration reforms to advance humanitarian protection. When the U.S. addresses the structural challenges of migration management first, technology can be put to good use.



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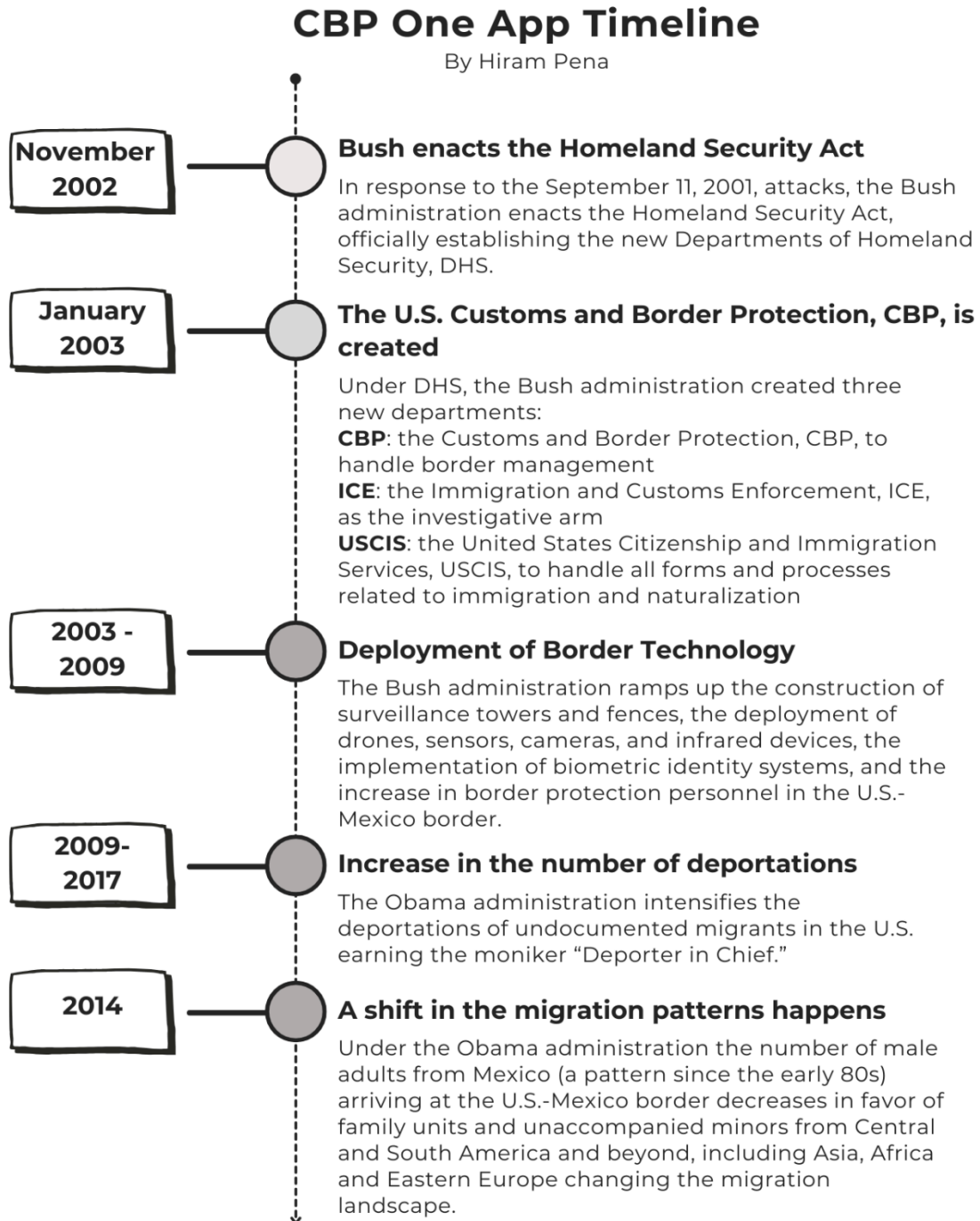
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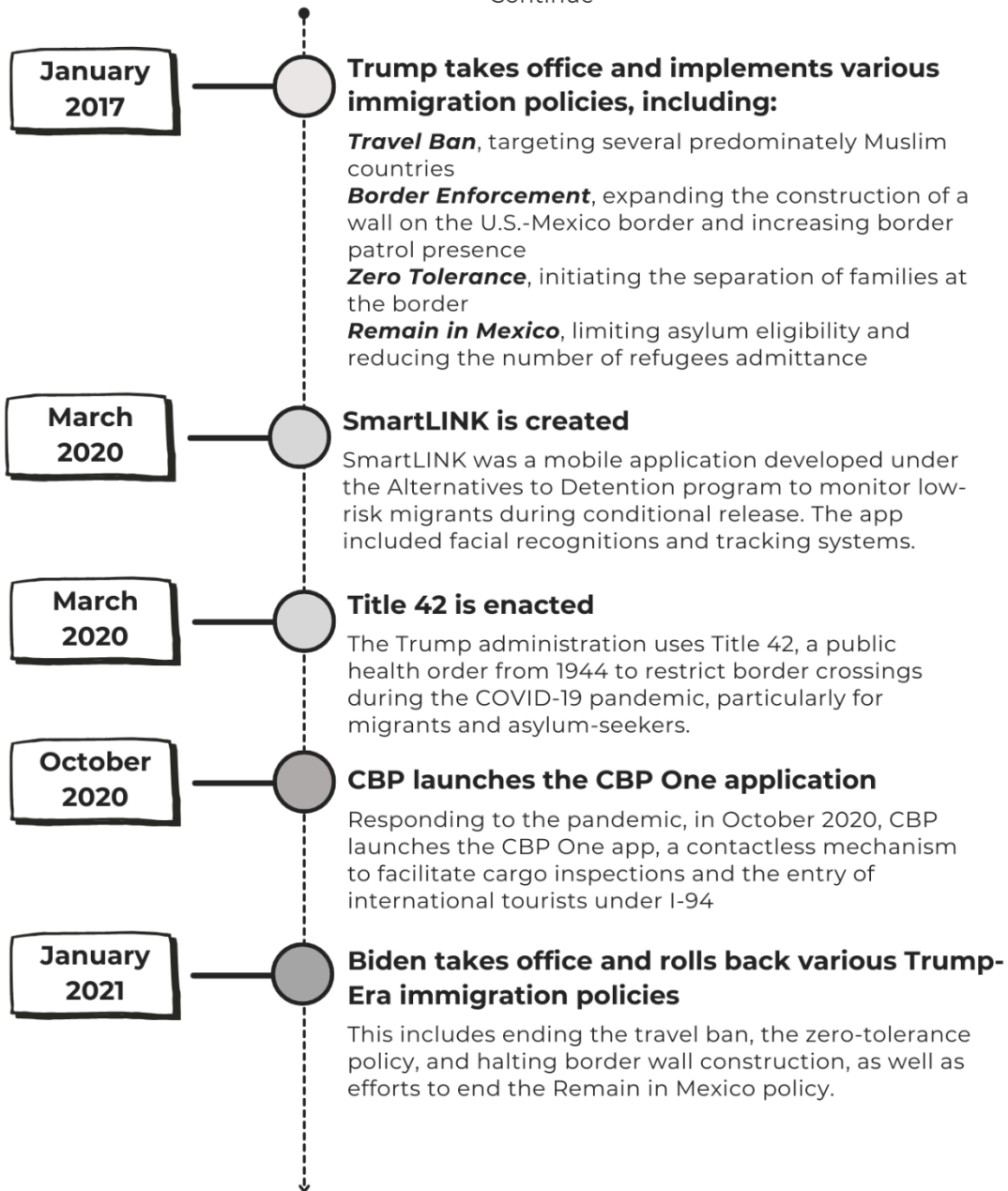
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## Annex A. CBP One App Timeline



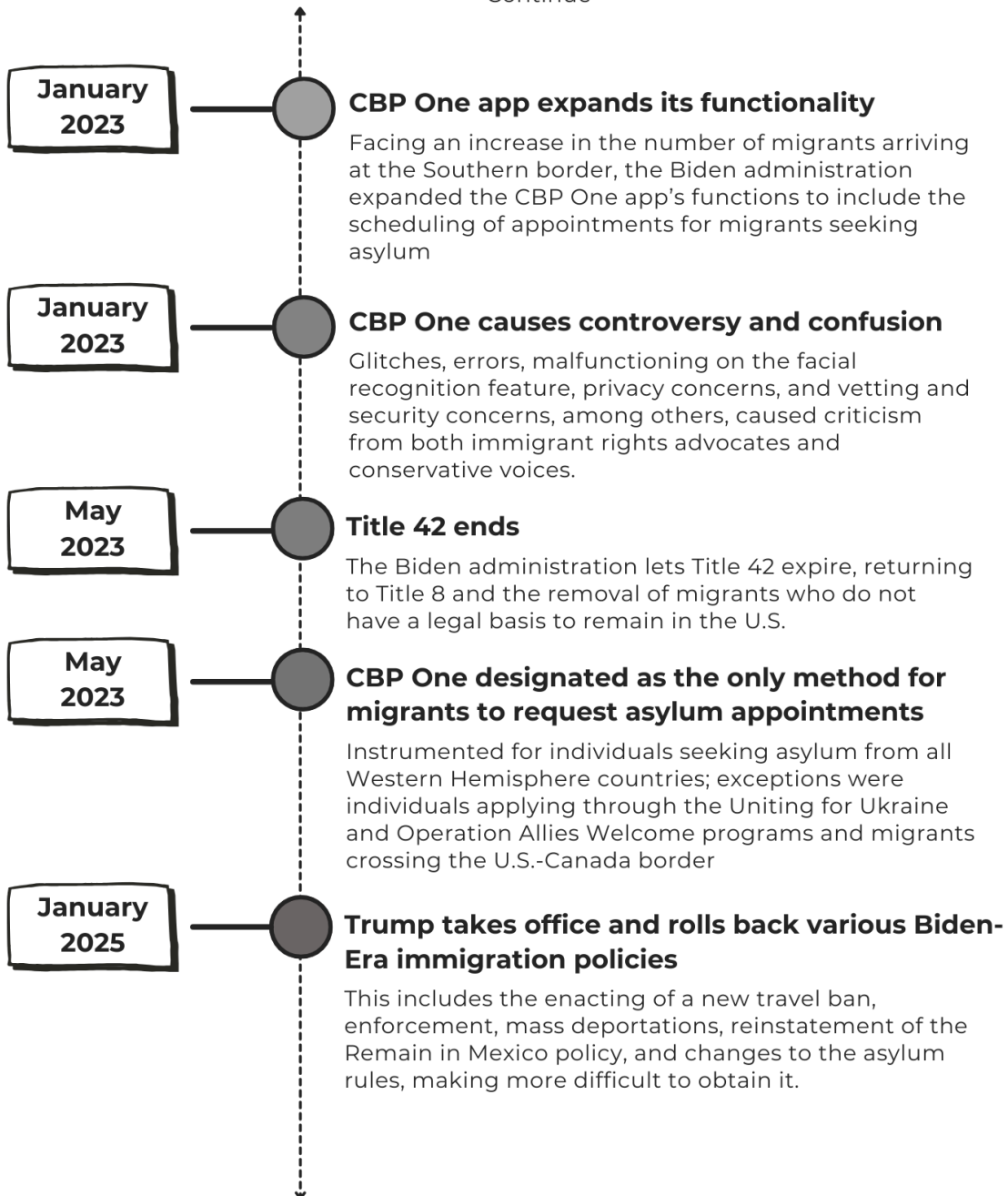
## CBP One App Timeline

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