THE PRESIDENT'S CHOICE · THE SECOND TERM · BOOK SEVEN

Tom Homan

The Border Czar

Tom Homan, Forty Years on the Line, and the Mission He Carried for President Donald J. Trump

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · Author's Note, Prologue, and Chapter One

The President's Choice · The Second Term · Book Seven

International Publishing Corporation

Washington, D.C.

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Author's Note

This book is an account of the public career of Thomas Douglas Homan, a man who began his working life as a patrolman in a small upstate New York village and who, four decades later, became the official President Donald J. Trump entrusted with the security of the nation's borders and the enforcement of its immigration laws. It is written from the conviction that Homan's career deserves a full and serious record, and that the accomplishments of the men and women he has led should be set down while the events are still fresh.

A word about method. The figures in these pages come from the public record: statements and data releases of the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection; congressional testimony; court rulings; and contemporaneous reporting by national and regional news organizations. Where a number is an official government figure, it is identified as such. Where a figure has been disputed by independent analysts, that dispute is noted. Where Homan's own words are quoted, they are drawn from public interviews, press conferences, and speeches, and the quotations are kept short.

This is not a neutral book in the sense of having no point of view. It argues that Tom Homan has been one of the most consequential law enforcement executives of his generation, that his loyalty to President Trump has been matched by loyalty to the law and to the officers who carry it out, and that history is likely to judge his tenure as Border Czar as the period in which the United States regained operational control of its southern border. But an argument is only as strong as its willingness to face the other side. For that reason, one chapter is given over entirely to the case made by Homan's critics, presented as fairly as the author can present it. Readers who disagree with the conclusions of this book will at least find their own objections stated honestly here.

Homan himself has never sought to be the subject of a book of praise. He has described himself, again and again, simply as a cop. That self-description is the thread that runs through everything that follows.

Robert Miller
Washington, D.C.
November 2026

Prologue

The Trailer in Victoria

In the early hours of May 14, 2003, sheriff's deputies in Victoria County, Texas, answered a call at a truck stop along a lonely stretch of highway. What they found there would become the deadliest human-smuggling case in the modern history of the United States. An insulated refrigerated trailer, hauled north from the Rio Grande Valley around Harlingen, had been unhitched and abandoned. More than seventy people had been sealed inside it for hours in the South Texas heat, with no ventilation and no water. Seventeen were dead at the scene. Two more would die at area hospitals. Fifty-five survived.

Among the dead was a five-year-old boy. He was found with his father, who had died trying to shield him.

A federal immigration investigator named Tom Homan was in Dallas that morning, wearing a suit and preparing to give a speech, when the call came that he was needed in Victoria. He flew down and walked onto the scene still dressed for the podium. The local sheriff and a Texas Ranger led him through it, and then, as Homan later recalled in an interview, they turned to him and made clear the case now belonged to the federal government. It was his.

Homan has told this story many times in the years since, in congressional hearings, on television, before audiences of agents and of skeptics. He tells it the same way each time, and he always comes back to the boy. It is not a story he tells to win an argument. It is the story he tells to explain who he is.

Investigators would eventually unravel the smuggling network that loaded those people into the trailer. Fourteen people were indicted. The driver, Tyrone Williams, was convicted and ultimately resentenced to more than thirty-three years in federal prison. Other members of the organization received sentences ranging from one

year to more than two decades. The case was closed in the sense that law enforcement closes cases. For Homan, it was never closed in any other sense.

What Homan took from Victoria was a conviction that has shaped every position he has held since: that a border which can be crossed illegally is a border that will be crossed by criminal organizations for profit, and that those organizations regard the people they move as cargo. In his view, every policy signal that tells migrants they will be released once they arrive is, in effect, an advertisement for the smugglers. Every surge of illegal crossings is a surge of revenue for the cartels. And every trailer, every stash house, every desert crossing carries the possibility of another Victoria.

His critics have argued with many of the conclusions Homan has drawn from that conviction. Some have argued that the enforcement measures he championed create their own human costs. That debate will be taken up in its place. But no one who has watched Tom Homan speak about that trailer has doubted that the conviction is sincere.

Twenty-three years after Victoria, in the fiscal year that ended on September 30, 2026, the U.S. Border Patrol recorded fewer than 99,000 apprehensions along the entire southwest border, the lowest annual total in the agency's history. Nationwide, U.S. Customs and Border Protection reported 379,243 encounters, the lowest figure it had ever recorded. For the first time on record, the Border Patrol completed an entire fiscal year without releasing a single migrant into the interior of the country. In the same fiscal year, Immigration and Customs Enforcement carried out 483,200 removals, more than in any year since the agency was created.

Those numbers were the product of many hands: a President who made border security the centerpiece of two campaigns, a Congress that funded the effort, cabinet secretaries, commissioners, field office directors, and tens of thousands of officers and agents. But if any one official could be said to have carried the operational burden of

turning the President's direction into results, it was the man who had walked through that trailer in 2003.

This is his story.

Part One

The Making of a Lawman

Chapter One

West Carthage — A Family Badge

The North Country

Far from the border with Mexico, in the northern reaches of New York State, the Black River runs west out of the Adirondack foothills toward Lake Ontario. Along its banks sit a string of old mill towns, and one of them is a pair of villages that face each other across the water: Carthage on one side, West Carthage on the other. This is the North Country, a region of dairy farms, long winters, paper mills, and modest frame houses, where the nearest large city is Watertown and the nearest international boundary is not the Rio Grande but the St. Lawrence River and the Canadian frontier, some thirty-five miles to the north.

Thomas Douglas Homan was born there on November 28, 1961. He was one of seven children in a Roman Catholic family, and he grew up in a place where people knew their neighbors, went to Mass on Sunday, and expected one another to show up for work. In later life, after he had become one of the best-known law enforcement officials in the country, Homan would often return to the language of that upbringing. He talked about right and wrong in plain terms. He talked about duty. He talked about the difference between people who keep their word and people who do not. Those who have dismissed this as political theater have generally not spent much time in places like West Carthage, where that vocabulary is simply how people speak.

West Carthage was, and remains, a small place. In a village of its size the police department is not an abstraction. It is a handful of officers

whose names everyone knows, whose cruisers everyone recognizes, and whose families sit in the same pews and shop in the same stores as everyone else. For the Homan family, that department was a family business. Tom Homan's father was a West Carthage police officer. So was his grandfather.

A Family Tradition

It is difficult to overstate what that inheritance means for a boy growing up in a small town. A child whose father is the local policeman learns early that the badge carries obligations that do not end at the close of a shift. He sees his father called away from supper. He hears the phone ring at night. He learns that some of the people his father deals with are neighbors on their worst days, and that the job requires both firmness and a kind of practical compassion. He learns that the law is not a set of abstract principles debated by professors, but a set of rules that someone has to enforce, face to face, in the real world.

Homan has said relatively little in public about the specifics of his childhood, and this book will not invent details he has not shared. But the broad outline is clear, and it is the outline of a boy who grew up assuming he would someday wear the uniform. When Homan later described his own career, he did not talk about it as a path he discovered. He talked about it as something close to a calling he inherited.

That inheritance helps explain a quality that colleagues, supporters, and even many critics have noticed in him over the years. Homan does not speak like a bureaucrat. He does not hedge. He does not talk about enforcement policy in the passive voice, as something that simply happens. He talks about it as something people do, and he talks about the people who do it with unmistakable loyalty. When he defends an ICE officer or a Border Patrol agent, he is defending someone who reminds him of his father and grandfather.

Faith and Family

The Catholic faith of Homan's upbringing has remained part of his public identity. He has spoken of it in interviews and has, at times, found himself in public disagreement with Catholic clergy over immigration policy, a tension he has addressed directly rather than avoided. For Homan, as for many Catholics in law enforcement, there is no contradiction between faith and enforcement of the law. In his telling, the law exists in large part to protect the vulnerable, and that includes migrants who are exploited by smugglers. He has argued that a policy which encourages families to place their children in the hands of criminal organizations is not compassionate, however it may be described.

Readers will form their own views on that argument. What matters for understanding Homan is that he does not experience his work as a betrayal of his upbringing. He experiences it as a fulfillment of it.

In 1980, still a young man, Homan married Elizabeth, a girl he had met in high school. The marriage has lasted more than four decades. The couple raised four children. Homan has largely kept his family out of the public eye, and this book respects that choice. It is worth noting only that the stability of his home life is one of the constants in a career that would take him from upstate New York to the California desert, to Texas, to Washington, and back again many times. Through decades of transfers, long hours, and work that frequently placed him in danger and later in the center of national controversy, the marriage held.

Education

Homan's formal education followed the path of many working-class young people in the North Country who wanted a career in law enforcement. He enrolled at Jefferson Community College in Watertown, the county's two-year public college, and earned an associate degree in criminal justice. He then continued his studies within the State University of New York system, earning a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from the campus then known as the SUNY Institute of Technology at Utica/Rome, which has since become SUNY Polytechnic Institute.

There is nothing glamorous about this résumé, and that is precisely the point. Homan did not come to federal service through an elite law school, a congressional staff job, or a political campaign. He came through a community college and a state school, studying the same criminal justice curriculum that thousands of future police officers study every year. Throughout his career he would be surrounded by lawyers, policy advisers, political appointees, and academics. He was never one of them, and he never pretended to be. His authority came from somewhere else: from having done the job at every level.

This background would become one of his greatest assets in Washington. When Homan testified before Congress, he did so as someone who had made arrests, worked smuggling cases, supervised agents in the field, and managed detention and removal operations. When he spoke to officers, they knew he had stood where they stood. And when he spoke to the public, his manner of speaking, blunt and unadorned, carried a credibility that polished officials often lack.

Patrolman Homan

In 1983, Tom Homan followed his father and grandfather into the West Carthage Police Department. He was a village patrolman, doing the work village patrolmen do: traffic stops, domestic calls, bar fights, accidents on icy roads, the small crimes and large sorrows of a working town. It was the foundation of everything that came after.

Small-town policing teaches lessons that large agencies sometimes forget. In a village, an officer cannot hide behind an institution. He must make decisions on his own, often without backup, and live with the consequences among people he will see again the next day. He learns to read situations quickly. He learns that authority, to be effective, must be exercised consistently; that the same rule must apply to the mayor's son and the mill worker's son. He learns that the law loses its force when it is enforced selectively, and that people notice when it is.

Homan would later make that last point the center of his public philosophy on immigration. Again and again, as acting director of ICE and later as Border Czar, he would argue that the immigration laws passed by Congress mean nothing if they are not enforced, and that selective non-enforcement corrodes respect for law generally. It is easy to imagine where he first learned to think that way.

The Fishing Trip

Homan's career might have remained in West Carthage, or in some other department in upstate New York, had it not been for a chance encounter. As Homan has recounted, he was out fishing one day in 1983 when he met a U.S. Border Patrol agent. In that part of New York, Border Patrol agents were a familiar presence; the Canadian border was close, and the agency maintained stations throughout the region. The conversation turned to the agent's work, and something in it caught the young patrolman's interest. He decided to apply.

It is one of those small moments on which large lives turn. The Border Patrol, then part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service under the Department of Justice, offered a young officer something a village department could not: a federal career, national scope, and a mission with stakes that extended well beyond any single community. The Border Patrol also offered something else that would have appealed to a young man raised on stories of his father's and grandfather's work. It offered a frontier.

In 1984, Homan was accepted. He packed up and left the North Country for the other end of the country, to a Border Patrol station in the high desert of southern California. He would not live in West Carthage again for decades, but he would never stop describing himself as a product of it. When he returned home years later as a nationally known figure, local organizations welcomed him as a native son, and the Watertown newspaper covered his appointments as hometown news.

What West Carthage Gave Him

Biographers of public figures are often tempted to find in childhood the complete key to a later career. That temptation should be resisted here. Tom Homan was shaped by many experiences after he left West Carthage, and some of the most important, like the trailer in Victoria, came decades later. But it would be equally mistaken to ignore what the village gave him.

It gave him a model of law enforcement as service rather than as power. It gave him the belief that the law should be applied evenly. It gave him a family culture in which wearing the badge was honorable, and in which loyalty to colleagues and to the chain of command was taken for granted. It gave him a faith that framed his work as a moral undertaking. And it gave him a plain way of speaking that would one day make him one of the most recognizable voices in American public life.

All of those qualities would be on display in the years ahead. All of them would be tested. Some would draw admiration and some would draw fierce criticism. But none of them were invented for the cameras. They were there in 1983, when a young patrolman in a small village decided that he wanted to see what lay beyond it.

The Road Ahead

When Homan left for the Border Patrol in 1984, the American immigration system stood on the eve of major change. Two years later, Congress would pass the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which granted legal status to roughly three million people who had entered or remained in the country unlawfully and promised, in exchange, tougher enforcement at the border and in the workplace. The legalization happened. The enforcement, by the judgment of many observers across the political spectrum, largely did not. That bargain, and its failure, would shape the politics of immigration for the next forty years, and it would shape Tom Homan's view of what happens when the government promises enforcement and does not deliver it.

Homan entered federal service at the very moment the modern immigration debate was taking shape. He would serve through every major turn that followed: the expansion of the Border Patrol in the 1990s, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security after September 11, 2001, the enforcement surges and policy reversals of the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden years. Few officials in American history have seen the system from as many angles, or for as long.

The patrolman from West Carthage was about to learn the border.

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The President’s Choice

Portraits of the people who served
President Donald J. Trump.

Tom Homan — The President’s Choice · The Second Term · Book Seven — publication date and price to be announced.

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International Publishing Corporation

Washington, D.C.

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