



Los Angeles Times: President Trump is wrong: Immigration makes us a greater nation

November 5th, 2018

As election day nears, the noise out of the White House on immigration has been deafening, a torrent of lies and assertions designed to reinforce the misperception that immigrants — including, but not only, those who come to the country illegally — are a danger, an invading force that must be stopped. Underpinning this hysterical reaction are three big and wrongheaded assumptions: that immigrants are disproportionately criminals and gangsters or otherwise violent; that they pose a threat to the pocketbooks of hardworking real Americans by taking away jobs and/or living off government handouts; and that in these ways and others their arrival will subsume some embattled American culture and keep this country from becoming great again.

But that's just wrong. Whatever American culture is — and it runs a broad gamut from North Atlantic lobster to Southern grits to taco stands and from jazz to opera to folk music and hip-hop — immigration doesn't threaten it. President Trump is engaged in a blatant and cynical effort to play to xenophobia and nativism in hopes of helping the Republican Party maintain control of Congress. The president continued his fearmongering on immigration Thursday, just hours after the Washington Post released a poll showing that the issue resonates strongly in battleground districts.

The fact is that Trump, like the vast majority of us, is descended from immigrants: His impoverished mother, following her older sisters, emigrated from a remote Scottish island to find work as a housekeeper in New York; his paternal grandfather emigrated from Germany.

So are immigrants dangerous criminals and gang-bangers? Trump has said that Mexico sends us "rapists" and other criminals rather than "their best" (never mind that immigrants are not "sent" by their home governments). He's talked about the "SO DANGEROUS" refugees from the seven Muslim-majority countries subject to his travel ban.

Even though it is true that some immigrants commit crimes — they are human, after all — immigrants, regardless of their legal status, commit crimes at lower rates than native-born Americans. Study after study shows that communities with high numbers of undocumented immigrants tend to have lower rates of violent crime. A Cato Institute analysis of Texas data found that the homicide conviction rate for all immigrants was 1.41 per 100,000, less than half of the 3.88 rate for native-born Americans; the rate for illegal immigrants was also below that of native-born Americans. Another study in the Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice found that

over 40 years in major metropolitan areas, "immigration is consistently linked to decreases in violent (e.g., murder) and property (e.g., burglary) crime throughout the time period." If the president and his supporters were to make an argument by fact rather than citing anecdotes of individual crimes, they'd have to acknowledge that, statistically speaking, immigrants reduce the overall U.S. crime rate.

Nor are they a drag on the economy. Employment rates for immigrants tend to be higher than for native-born Americans, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. A report by Trump's own alma mater, the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, concludes that immigrants, whether they are here legally or illegally, tend to compete not with working-class, native-born Americans but with earlier arriving immigrants, and that they are unlikely to replace native-born workers or reduce their wages over the long term. At the same time, their spending adds to the economy, helping create jobs higher up the economic ladder. A 2016 study published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found that while there might be short-term negative economic impacts from immigration at the local level (such as increased school spending), "children of immigrants ... are among the strongest economic and fiscal contributors in the U.S. population, contributing more in taxes than either their parents or the rest of the native-born population."

And with the native-born population aging and births declining, the U.S. economy will need immigrants to fill jobs, pay taxes and shore up Social Security. Even if some new immigrants need a little help to get their feet underneath them, the long-term economic benefits of immigration are undeniable, from helping expand the economy through innovations and new businesses. It has always been thus.

Some 326 million people live in the U.S., and 43.7 million, or 13.5 percent, were born in other countries (about a quarter of those live here without permission). Immigrants and their American-born children account for one-quarter of the current U.S. population. They change us and we change them. As a 2015 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine report pointed out, "integration is a two-way process: it happens both because immigrants experience change once they arrive and because native-born Americans change in response to immigration." Americans generations removed from Irish roots are no less American because they celebrate St. Patrick's Day, nor are people of Jamaican descent less American if they listen to reggae. Even if second or third generations still speak Spanish at home or eat halal food or wear a turban or a sari, they are no less American for it.

We are a stronger, better, richer nation for our immigrant roots, a truth that Trump and his choir try to paint differently. We have always had that mind-set in this country, that fear of the new and the different. But to our general benefit, the nation has persistently risen above its worst instincts and provided a canvas for reinvention, and for the realization of dreams and ambitions. It's the kind of place where even the son of an immigrant housekeeper can become president.