CHAREN: Children, 'animals' and immigrants

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Maybe you've seen the video of the hero the French have dubbed "Spider-Man." When he saw a toddler dangling off a fourth-story balcony, he scaled the exterior of the Paris building in about 30 seconds to save the child. Turns out Mamoudou Gassama was a newly arrived illegal immigrant from Mali. A grateful President Emmanuel Macron made him a French citizen a day later.

Or consider the story of Jesus Manuel Cordova. He illegally crossed the border from Mexico into Arizona and came upon a damaged car. Inside was a dead mother and an injured 9-year-old boy. Cordova stayed with the child for hours until help arrived.

So, does that mean all illegal immigrants are heroes? Obviously not, no more than the crimes of MS-13 or the murder of Kate Steinle prove that all illegal immigrants are criminals.

Both parties are resorting to stereotypes and incitement. The Democrats, intent upon portraying the utter depravity of the Trump administration's approach to immigration, seized upon a story that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency had "lost" 1,475 illegal immigrant minors who were separated from their parents. A widely cited story alleged that federal officials could not find these kids. Several pointed to a Frontline account alleging that at least some of the kids had been released to human traffickers.

But within a couple of days, the corrections flowed in. It wasn't, The New York Times and others advised, that the kids were lost. Rather, these were among the "unaccompanied minors" who crossed the border in 2014. They were placed with adults. The Times quoted Ephrat Livni of Quartz, who explained: "It certainly sounds bad," but "many of those missing kids may well be with their parents or families, and they may have gone off the grid deliberately to avoid Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) authorities." As for the Frontline story, it referenced a government report from 2016, i.e., before the current administration could be held accountable.

But here's the irony: The Trump administration's position amounts to saying, "We weren't responsible for separating children from their parents, but going forward, we will be." Attorney General Jeff Sessions has announced that separating even very young children from their parents will now be policy — as deterrence. "If you are smuggling a child then we will prosecute you,

and that child will be separated from you as required by law," he said. "If you don't like that, then don't smuggle children over our border."

Well, if deterrence of illegal immigration justifies visiting the sins (if that's what they are) of the parents upon the children, why stop there? Why not confine the children in cages, feed them only bread and water and confiscate their teddy bears? After all, the current policy is indifferent to the suffering the children will experience in the name of punishing the parents, so why not ramp it up? Surely that would be an even better deterrent.

The president and his advisers routinely recommend harsh immigration measures on the grounds of national security and crime, as if our borders are being overrun by terrorists and rapists. A Republican National Committee campaign spot shows Nancy Pelosi criticizing President Trump's use of the term "animals" regarding gang members. Her comments are juxtaposed against a gruesome story of a Satanic murder committed by a "Guatemalan native," and other stories of crimes committed by MS-13. The tagline: "Democrats' midterm message: MS-13 killers ... they aren't so bad." At his Tennessee rally, President Trump, with characteristic judiciousness, told the crowd that Pelosi "loves MS-13."

But it's flatly false to say that immigrants are disproportionately represented among offenders. The Cato Institute has published several studies showing that immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than the native born, and illegal immigrants are the most law-abiding of all. Overall crime rates in the United States, despite an uptick in murders in certain cities since 2014, have declined by 64 percent since 1990, while immigration rates spiked (immigration rates have declined since 2005). A study by four universities found that the 10 regions that had the largest increases in immigrants all had lower levels of crime in 2016 than in 1980.

Of course there are awful cases. But the plural of anecdote is not data, and the appeal to fear is contemptible. Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen expressed alarm that 300,000 would-be border crossers are apprehended yearly. But this is a stark drop from just 18 years ago, when more than 1.6 million were stopped. At the same time, more people are now leaving the U.S. to return to Mexico than arriving from Mexico.

The dueling anecdote game can be played endlessly. ICE has arrested an illegal alien adult with Down syndrome, whose three siblings and father live in the U.S. An armed ICE agent was videotaped using a crowbar to enter a home. When the occupants demanded a warrant, he said, "You're watching too many movies."

Most ICE agents doubtless follow the law and shouldn't be tarred by the bad acts of a few. The same can be said of immigrants