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Castillo: Trump exploits murder of Mollie Tibbetts for political gain

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“Please remember, evil comes in every color.”

These words should give us all pause. They were written by a grieving relative of Iowa college student Mollie Tibbetts, apparently as a rebuke to those – President Trump included – who were quick to politicize Tibbetts’ murder as a talking point in the immigration debate.

Debate isn’t the right word, actually. America’s ongoing conversation about illegal immigration usually isn’t a debate at all. No, in some corners it’s descended into a vile and cynical cauldron of lies and bigotry, scapegoating and misdirection. Don’t believe me? Peruse the comments on social media.

The president stirred that boiling pot just hours after Tibbetts’ body was recovered last week and a suspect in her murder was charged. Authorities said he is a Mexican immigrant who is in the country illegally; his lawyer disputed that.

As we’ve come to expect from the president who literally launched his presidential campaign with incendiary remarks that Mexico is sending criminals and rapists to the U.S., Trump seized on the suspect’s legal status.

“You heard about today with the illegal alien coming in, very sadly, from Mexico and you saw what happened to that incredible, beautiful young woman,” Trump told his fervent supporters at a rally. “Should’ve never happened. ... The laws are so bad, the immigration laws are such a disgrace.”

Trump said his administration is getting the laws changed, but first, “we have to get more Republicans.”

That’s the president blowing the dog whistle to rile up his base ahead of the midterm elections and cement his reputation as an illegal immigration hardliner. It’s also politically deceitful: Republicans already hold the majority in Congress, which has failed to pass immigration reform and has turned back bipartisan proposals to get it done. Trump has insisted immigration legislation must include taxpayer funding for his border wall, which would cost billions. Not surprisingly, Trump’s wall isn’t getting the kind of support he expected – even among Republicans.

Yet, in a video released the next day as he ginned up support for the wall – what all of this is about, really – Trump asserted again: “We need Republicans to (change the laws) because the Democrats aren’t going to do it.”

Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick picked up the cue and shamelessly said Democrats have Tibbetts’ blood on their hands, and the media is an accomplice. He parlayed the issue into a televised debate with Geraldo Rivera.

Back to the president, he repeated one of his main talking points about “tremendous crime trying to come through the borders.”

Another White House video released Wednesday suggested that separating families at the border is not as bad as the American families being permanently separated from their loved ones because of crimes committed by undocumented immigrants.

“Tremendous crime.” “Permanently separated.” “Criminals.” “Rapists.” These are the calculated terms Trump and his supporters use to criminalize undocumented immigrants, the vast majority who are peaceful, law-abiding people. Evil comes in every color. So do good people.

Ah, but they committed a crime by entering the country illegally, you say. True, illegal entry is a misdemeanor offense under federal law. Americans are charged with misdemeanors every day. And overstaying a valid visa – the way most immigrants join the undocumented population, according to a Center for Migration Studies report – is not a federal offense. Visa overstays outnumbering illegal border crossings has been the trend since 2007, but you don’t hear about that from the crowd pushing a border wall that would be utterly useless against overstays.

The narrative that undocumented immigrants are prone to commit crimes is another blow of the dog whistle, one debunked by facts. Studies show that immigrants are less apt to commit crimes than those of us born here — and they have no effect on crime rates.

In 2016, 746 native-born Texans, 32 illegal immigrants, and 28 legal immigrants were convicted of homicide, according to the Cato Institute. The conviction rate for homicide among undocumented immigrants was 44 percent below that of native-born Americans that year in the state.

The murder of a young woman is horrific any time it occurs, no matter the nationality or legal status of the suspect. No one can dispute that her murder was a heinous act and that the killer must be brought to justice. All of us shudder to think what it must be like to lose a loved one to a violent crime. Tragically, some know the throes of such anguish.

In exploiting the Tibbetts murder for political gain, however, Trump makes overtures to racism and plays to the xenophobia some Americans surely feel. A young, white woman killed by a brown man, a Mexican national who, if officials are right, should not have been in this country in the first place undoubtedly strikes fear – and fans racial resentment – among some people.

Yes, our immigration system is profoundly broken. But, we should not condemn all immigrants for the criminal act of one person. Want to blame someone for the murder of Mollie Tibbetts? Blame the killer.

Blame a broken immigration system too, if you will. But stop pointing fingers and deflecting duty. We elect our representatives to fix the people's problems, not to politicize them, nor demonize an entire population, nor to scapegoat. If there's anything Sen. John McCain taught us in his storied life, it's that elected officials should be foremost public servants and that they should reach across the aisle to get things done.

"I don't want Mollie's memory to get lost amongst politics," Billie Jo Calderwood, Mollie Tibbetts' aunt wrote last week.

Instead of listening to the ghoulish politicization of Tibbetts' death, we should all listen to her aunt's words. For evil comes in every color.