How to manufacture a crisis: Deconstructing Donald Trump's immigration rhetoric

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(MENAFN - The Conversation) One of the most Trumpian passages of this year's State of the Union address is the section on immigration. President Trump is not the first president to talk about border security, illegal crossing, and immigration reform in a State of the Union speech. In fact, every US president since Bill Clinton in the mid-1990s has. He is, however, the only president to make it an 'urgent national crisis.' and spend so much time on 'criminal illegal aliens.' Here is a quick deconstruction of President Trump's rhetorical strategy for getting the wall built.

Conflate illegal entry and violent crime

There is nothing more persuasive that seemingly scary numbers to convince an audience that the situation is objectively critical.

'ICE officers made 266,000 arrests of criminal aliens, including those charged or convicted of nearly 100,000 assaults. 30,000 sex crimes and 4,000 killings or murders.'

Trump used the exact same numbers in his January 8 speech on immigration from the Oval Office and in his January 12 tweet . As the Washington Post noted , the problem is that these are fuzzy and misleading numbers. They include, for instance, 'serious and nonviolent offenses' and the totals cover 'all types of offenses, including illegal entry or reentry.' Even if you just look at the core of the argument (that illegal aliens commit more crimes), it is contradicted by independent academic studies – for example, here , here and here) – that show that illegal immigration does not increase the prevalence of violent crime or drugs and that undocumented immigrants are actually less likely to break the law than legal US residents.

Moreover, Donald Trump's allegation that the border city of El Paso, Texas, had 'one of the highest rates of violent crime' prior to the construction of the wall has been strongly rebutted (here and here). Similarly, his claim that 'the wall in San Diego almost completely ended illegal crossing' is incomplete at best .

Frame undocumented immigrants as 'illegal aliens'

'Framing' is a communication technique that consists of using specific language to portray a topic negatively or positively by relying on biased mental representations. For instance, by calling undocumented immigrants 'criminal illegal aliens', the US president explicitly implies that even individuals who have not yet crossed the US-Mexico border (such as those in the 'caravan' of immigrants travelling to the US from Central America) have already broken the law. Excluded is the possibility that some are refugees and may request asylum, in which case, they are not technically immigrants, much less illegal, at least until their claims are possibly denied. In fact, it is the Trump administration's new policy of forcing asylum seekers to remain in Mexico while their cases are pending in the United States that may very well be illegal .

The expression 'illegal aliens' is a rarety but not a novelty in a State of the Union address – it was used by Bill Clinton in 1995 , for example. But yet it is not a neutral term: It presents immigrants through the frame of crime. As explained by the Cato Institute , a libertarian think tank, using the term 'illegal aliens' rather than 'undocumented immigrants' is more likely to sway a more conservative person against immigration because of 'their greater support for order and structure, which is offended by illegality.'

Make the illegal alien a savage enemy

What is a novelty in this State of the Union address and a trademark of Trump's rhetoric is the portrayal of immigrants as a central enemy. Contrary to all his modern predecessors, the president uses a threatening Other that is both inside and outside the border. Within the nation, this immediate danger is the 'savage gang MS-13 [which] now operates in at least 20 different American states'. The reality is that with fewer than 10,000 members , MS-13 makes up less than 1% of the gang members in the United States . Clearly, no matter how cruel they are, they hardly constitute a national threat.

Another threat highlighted by Trump are the 'ruthless coyotes, cartels, drug dealers', the 'sadistic human and sex traffickers' and the 'smugglers who use migrant children as human pawns to exploit our laws and gain access to our country.' In the speech, such imaginatively portrayed criminals are used to symbolise chaos and stoke fear:

'The lawless state of our southern border is a threat to the safety, security and financial well-being of all America.'

What is at stake is therefore law, order and ultimately civilisation itself. It is the rationale for words of war: ordering 'another 3,750 troops to our southern border to prepare for this tremendous onslaught' and calling Americans 'to defend our very dangerous southern border out of love and devotion to our fellow citizens and our country'. This war is not just metaphorical. It has casualties: the 'countless Americans […] murdered by criminal illegal aliens' and the 'tens of thousands of innocent Americans killed by lethal drugs that cross our border and flood into our cities.'

This framing of immigrant as 'savage Others' is reminiscent of the frontier rhetoric employed against native Americans in the 19th century.

Add lewd sexual stories

This savage is all the more barbaric that he is also a sexual predator:

'One in three [immigrant] women is sexually assaulted […] thousands of young girls and women [are] smuggled into the United States [to be sold] into prostitution and modern-day slavery.'

Beyond the unreliability of these statistics , the topic of sex crime has been a recurrent motif in Donald Trump's remarks and tweets about immigrants. The speech that launched his campaign on June 16, 2015 , made the headlines because he accused Mexico of sending rapists to the United States. He later made a similar comment in reference to the 'caravan' of immigrants . Earlier this year, Trump even gave some graphic details of 'women tied up, bound, with duct tape put around their faces, around their mouths, in many cases they can't even breathe.'

Despite a complete lack of evidence , Trump reportedly has repeated this account 10 times. This type of narrative does not need to be true to serve its political purpose, it just needs to feel true. Such stories are more likely to trigger a reaction in a more conservative audience, sexuality and gender being features of the language of nationalism . They reflect a philosophy in which power is virtue and control is paramount.

The nation-as-a-body metaphor

Metaphorical and literal stories of rape have been used by presidents to provide a focal point for the public to direct their anger at America's enemies. Saddam Hussein had, for instance, 'raped Kuwait' and built 'rape rooms' . Such narratives exploit the nation-as-a-person metaphor. In Trump's narrative, a parallel can be drawn between rape and the invasion of a nation by illegal aliens. In his immigration speech on January 8 , the president clearly talked about 'those who have violated our borders.'

This bodily metaphor is likely to activate particular strong feelings in a more conservative or nationalist audience that tends to have a more gendered world view focused on power and strength. As Soraya Chemaly writes in the Huffington Post, for them:

'Rape is sex and sex is war; rapists are winners, the raped are losers. Shame, according to Trump's use, is reserved for the raped, not the rapist.'

Both actions are forced penetration of the container of a body: the intimate body (self) or the social body (the nation).

The fear of invasion is further illustrated by the story of Trump's guest Deborah Bissel, whose 'parents were burglarised and shot to death in their Reno, Nevada, home by an illegal alien'. It is no coincidence that the president used the dramatic story of a home invasion to parallel the invasion of dangerous aliens into the country.

The immediacy of the threat is reinforced by the idea that the nation is 'rapidly getting filled with liquid, which represents immigrants, and with them, illegal substances'. The drugs that are 'flood[ing] into our cities' or the MS-13 gang members 'streaming right back in,' in Trump's words, means that the arrival of immigrants is presented in terms of the entrance of excessive amounts of liquid into a container. Hence the peril of 'open borders,' 'wide-open areas' or 'loopholes', which warrants the construction of a flood wall. Hence his conclusion that 'walls work and walls save lives'.

Villains, victims and heroes

Like any good narrative, this story has clear types: mostly villains and victims (American citizens as well as the '300 women and girls rescued from the horror of this terrible situation'). Now it just needs heroes. They are 'our brave ICE officers' and the"brave men and women of law enforcement,' But ultimately, Donald Trump portrays himself as the true hero here, both the protector of other heroes and the builder of walls whose goal is to protect the body-nation:

'I pledge to you tonight that I will never abolish our heroes from ICE. […] The proper wall never got built. I'll get it built.

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