

Again, Trump pushes his favourite fear buttons

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January 8, 2019

Fear not terrorists arriving in the United States from Mexico. But keep an eye on those border-crossing Canadians with malice in their terrorism-inspired hearts, eh?

See, President Donald Trump has got it all wrong. And not for the first or, oh, thousandth time.

He keeps banging away at that \$5 billion wall along the Mexico-U.S. border. Even convinced the American networks to give him prime time Tuesday evening to make his “immigration crisis” case to the nation, on what was the 18th day of a partial government shutdown wrangle with Congress.

But somehow, amidst their eagerness to (quite properly) absolve Mexico of potential threats against homeland security, several prominent media outlets turned their — comparatively speaking — fault lens on the Great White North.

Said Trump in a Rose Garden news conference last Friday: “We have terrorists driving in through the southern border because they find that’s probably the easiest place to come through. They drive in and then make a left.”

In fact, if they’re *driving* across border entry points, no envisioned wall sprung from Trump’s wacky imagination, is going to stop them.

In his address from the Oval Office Tuesday night, Trump steered clear of the terrorism spectre, returning instead to familiar rhetoric about illegal migrants as murderers, rapists and drug dealers. Pushed his favourite fear buttons. The non-facts had quickly caught up with him.

From an Associated Press report picked up across America Monday: “State department reports on terrorism have expressed more concern about Canada, which unlike Mexico has been home to ‘violent extremists’ inspired by terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda and their affiliates and adherents.”

Sheesh, how did we get yanked into this debate? Albeit it is a sly and silly point of reference. But still.

The State Department 2017 report on terrorism, which indexes the threat posed by all countries around the world, noted that Canada had experienced “minimal terrorist activity” for that year. “The main external terrorist threats to Canada are from terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda ... and their sympathizers, while the main internal threat is from lone actors inspired by these groups and ideologies. By the end of 2017, approximately 180 Canadian citizens or permanent residents had travelled abroad to engage in terrorist activity in Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIS and approximately 60 have since returned.”

There were, in 2017, three alleged terrorist incidents in Canada: Alexandre Bissonnette opening fire on an Islamic cultural centre in Quebec City, killing six and wounding 19; Rehab Dughmush, accused of attempted murder after allegedly trying to attack three employees at a Toronto Canadian Tire store, with a golf club and a large knife; and Abdulahi Sharif, charged after a police constable was run down by a car and stabbed outside an Edmonton Eskimos game, four passersby were also struck during the police pursuit.

“When it comes to land crossings, Canada has more often been the source of terrorism suspects entering the U.S., though not in great numbers,” the AP story says. “By far the majority of people who arouse concern try to enter by air.”

Last month, a Canadian from Mississauga, Abdulrahman El Bahnasawy, was sentenced to four decades in federal prison for planning attacks in Times Square and the New York subway. The 20-year-old had pleaded guilty two years earlier to conspiring with ISIS operatives to commit terrorist acts.

There was at least one other alarming incident involving transit from Canada, way back in 1999, when an Algerian man was arrested by border agents when he tried to enter the U.S. from a border point in Washington state, with homemade explosives in his rental car. He was later convicted of plotting to bomb the L.A. international airport or “some other” airport in Southern California.

The aforementioned State Department report was far less forewarning of Mexico: “At year’s end, there was no credible evidence indicating that international terrorist groups have established bases in Mexico, worked with Mexican drug cartels or sent operatives via Mexico into the U.S.”

With a caveat: “The U.S. southern border remains vulnerable to potential terrorist transit, although terrorist groups likely seek other means of trying to enter the U.S.”

A separate organization, the CATO Institute — described as a libertarian think tank — says that, from 1975 through 2017, seven people who entered the U.S. illegally from “special interest” countries — states at least loosely tied to terrorism — were convicted of planning attacks on U.S. soil. None crossed from Mexico. They came from Canada or “jumped ship in U.S. ports,” as per the AP story. Every plot was foiled and no one was hurt.

According to CATO, the only known terrorists who crossed illegally from Mexico in those decades were three ethnic Albanians from Macedonia who arrived as children with their parents in 1985 and, in their 20s, were arrested in a foiled plot to attack an army base in Fort Dix, N.J.

None of these facts have hindered Trump in his demonization of Mexico and obsession with that damn wall.

The president persists in portraying Mexico as seething with terrorism suspects intent on wreaking havoc against America, as if they’ve been pouring in by the thousands. His administration claims U.S. border officials detained “nearly 4,000 known or suspected terrorists” last year. Yet media fact-checks reveal that only six people on a security watchlist were detained over a six-month period, as reported by NBC. Forty-one individuals were red-flagged by the Terrorist Screening Database between October 2017 and March 2018. But 35 of them were U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents.

But NBC couldn't resist the juxtaposition with Canada either, observing that 91 individuals on the database were stopped from entering from Canada, including 41 who were not American citizens or residents. Seven times more than Mexico!

Again with the beware Canada angle. Like we're some kind of terrorist piñata.

This is deeply annoying, especially given the urban myth that Canada was a conduit for the 9/11 hijackers. The claim is groundless. None of those 11 terrorists slipped into the U.S. via Canada, overland or in the air. Despite that assertion firmly refuted in the formal 9/11 Commission Report (2004), the fallacy endures in many quarters, the Canadian Embassy in Washington repeatedly striking it down whenever the premise is misstated.

The incorrect account arose from the early days, post-9/11, when two Boston newspapers and the Washington Post reported that investigators believed two of the hijackers came through Canada, possibly by boat. The New York Post declared that "terrorists bent on wreaking havoc" in the U.S. had found Canada "the path of least resistance." The Christian Science Monitor referred to Canada as "a haven for terrorists."

That view, while thoroughly discredited, gained oxygen anew when the new Liberal government scrapped a Conservative law stripping citizenship from convicted terrorists who also have citizenship in another country.

Justin Trudeau to Stephen Harper, at the pre-election 2015 Munk debate: "A Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian."

And Canada, to its shame apparently, is no Mexico.

Excuse us for being sensitive. Sorry.