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Even on his finest behavior, Trump can't be gracious to immigrants

Michael Gerson

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In general, a State of the Union address is massive in the moment and quickly forgotten. And President Trump's first State of the Union address was even more unmemorable than usual.

That, presumably, was the point. The speech aspired to political normalcy, and largely achieved it. The lavish use of everyday heroes was welcome relief from Trump's relentless narcissism. The partisan jabs were generally within acceptable State of the Union boundaries. The proposals on vocational schools and prisoner reentry gave evidence of a working White House policy process. The platitudes of unity were familiar and reassuring.

For Trump, rhetorical expectations are always a hurdle just millimeters above the ground. Did he call for restrictions on press freedom? Did he try to obstruct justice? Did he attack an opponent's wife? With Trump, being anodyne is an achievement. On State of the Union night, official Washington was like a sailor returning home from the Southern Hemisphere — grateful to be navigating by familiar stars.

But the speech was instructive in another way: by the obvious exception to its general tone. Even on his finest behavior — even wearing his Sunday best — Trump could not be gracious to immigrants. Their role in the address was largely to create an atmosphere of menace — variously killing children or running a truck into a bike path. "Americans are dreamers, too," said the president, as though young people facing deportation were living lives of privilege at the expense of American citizens.

Elements of Trump's immigration approach are better than his rhetoric. A path to citizenship for migrants brought to the United States as minors is a genuine concession on the part of the president. A pivot toward skills-based immigration has broad support, and not only on the Trump right. Few have ideological objections to additional border security (though Americans generally don't support a wall).

It is the sum total of Trump's plan, however, that reveals his deeper intention: a dramatic cut in legal immigration. According to a Cato Institute report, the president's approach would reduce the number of legal immigrants by up to 44 percent each year. It would likely bar 22 million immigrants over the next five decades. These would be the largest cuts in legal immigration since the 1920s.

Trump's arguments on immigration are uniformly exaggerated or wrong. There is little evidence that migrants take jobs from working-class Americans. They generally have skills and attitudes toward work that put them in competition with other migrants. There is no evidence that immigrants have higher rates of crime. The opposite is true. And most terrorism experts see little urgent threat from refugees (who are highly vetted) or from family unification.

But Trump is not really making a case that can be refuted with rational arguments. He exemplifies what social psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls the moral foundation of "purity." Trump's approach to immigration assumes that migrants are contaminants. Haitians "all have AIDS," Trump is reported to have said. Developing nations are "shithole countries." "They're bringing drugs," he argued, "They're bringing crime. They're rapists." His language about the border is borderline eugenic. The wall would prevent not just migration but infection, too.

As the State of the Union demonstrated, this attitude is not a removable part of Trump's appeal. It is a Jenga piece at the bottom of his ideological tower. Without promoting fear of "the other," there would be no Trumpism.

The desire to cut legal immigration is at odds with America's long-term interests. An aging population taking more and more entitlement benefits will require more workers to sustain those commitments (or confiscatory tax rates that undermine economic growth). Trump is opposed to entitlement reform and proposes to exclude tens of millions of legal immigrants — a dreadful combination. This demonstrates a reckless ignorance of economics and demography. It would condemn the United States to declining wealth and power.

America actually needs a generous supply of skilled immigrants over the next few decades. But "skilled" does not just mean engineers. Our economy requires skills in construction, the service industry and the agricultural sector as well — capabilities across a spectrum of work.

Economic arguments, however, go only so far. The best response to dehumanization is humanization. Someone needs to highlight the resilient Syrian refugees fleeing oppression and violence; migrants seeking a better life for their families beyond the Rio Grande; Haitians working long hours to send remittances back home. Their stories also deserve telling in the State of the Union address. But that will require a different president.