

Richmond Times-Dispatch

A. Barton Hinkle column: Anti-immigration stance fuels campaigns nationwide

A. Barton Hinkle

May 22, 2018

President Trump must be slipping. Yesterday an undocumented immigrant with an unpronounceable name was all over the news, and the president still hasn't demanded, let alone officially, that the Department of Justice look into the matter.

The immigrant — which according to The New York Times “has taken up permanent residence among us” — is 2015 BZ509, or “BZ” for short. It's an asteroid, orbiting in the neighborhood of Jupiter, but going in the opposite direction of Jupiter and all the other planets. Damn foreigners can't drive.

Like a lot of undocumented immigrants, BZ has been living among us for a considerable time — with no one the wiser and no harm done to anybody. But now that it's been brought to the attention of the authorities, it can expect a call from the intergalactic ICE squad at any time.

If all of this sounds a little nuts, well, OK. But then the entire immigration debate right now is not just batty, it's practically certifiable.

The big furor last week concerned President Trump's use of the word “animals” to refer to members of MS-13. Some news reports claimed he had used the term to describe all immigrants, which led to push-back from Trump supporters: There the media go again, lying about the president. This retort elicited a rebuttal in turn, to the effect that Trump's precise wording (to the extent such a thing exists; “Trump's precise wording” is almost an oxymoron) doesn't matter because the president “systematically obliterates any distinctions between the overwhelming majority of immigrants who are law-abiding and the violent minority among the foreign-born.”

That's certainly true, going back to the president's statement that Mexican immigrants are “bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”

A year or two ago remarks like that hit the air like a thunderclap out of a clear blue sky. Now they seem, if not tame (can one say “tame,” or is that too much like “animals?”), then more mainstream. But not in a good way.

These days federal immigration officials are splitting up undocumented-immigrant families — part of a deliberate strategy to discourage border-crossing. Here in Virginia supporters of gubernatorial candidate Corey Stewart have been mocking the name of GOP rival Nick Freitas, a veteran of the Army special forces, saying it sounds like something you'd order at Taco Bell.

In Georgia, state Sen. Michael Williams, who is running for governor, recently unveiled his “Michael Williams Deportation Bus,” which he says he will drive through Georgia's (non-existent) sanctuary cities. “We're not just going to track them, watch them roam around our state. We're going to put them on this bus, and send them home,” Williams says in an ad. The back of

the bus, whose windows have steel mesh over them, bears the legend: “DANGER! MURDERERS, RAPISTS, KIDNAPPERS, CHILD MOLESTERS, AND OTHER CRIMINALS ON BOARD.”

Actually, if Williams wants to send violent criminals to Mexico, he should round up American citizens, not immigrants — documented or otherwise. Data from Texas show, as the Cato Institute’s Alex Nowrasteh reported back in February, that “in 2015, the criminal conviction and arrest rates for immigrants were well below those of native-born Americans. Moreover, the conviction and arrest rates for illegal immigrants were lower than those for native-born Americans.”

Those results are consistent with other research — which shows, for instance, that metropolitan areas that have seen large immigration increases have, at the same time, seen their crime rates decline. Murder, rape, robbery, assault, drug use, DUI — time and again, the research shows that immigrant influxes do not increase the rates of such crimes.

Pointing this out doesn’t seem to have much effect. In fact, thanks to the phenomenon known as the “backfire effect,” it might just encourage immigration hawks to dig in their heels. Still, you do have to wonder why such furor over immigration should surface now. The country is in the 108th month of economic expansion. Unemployment is, at 3.9 percent, the lowest it’s been in two decades — so if immigrants are “taking our jobs,” they sure aren’t taking very many of them. Why the animosity toward people who are simply trying to make a better life for themselves?

Crime is down, business is booming, jobs are plentiful — so let’s go kick a Mexican in the teeth. Makes perfect sense, doesn’t it?