

Steve Chapman - On the border, Trump builds a wall of lies

Steve Chapman

January 10, 2019

Donald Trump's insistence that the nation faces a crisis of illegal immigration that requires a wall sealing off our southern border is notable for being false not only overall but in every particular. It brings to mind Voltaire's remark that the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy nor Roman nor an empire.

The president's Oval Office address Tuesday was the latest confirmation that on immigration, even more than on other topics, truth is his mortal foe. He doesn't contribute to the public debate; he pollutes it.

There is no epidemic of unauthorized entry from Mexico. In fact, the number of people apprehended trying to sneak in peaked nearly 20 years ago and has greatly shrunk. Last year, it was less than a quarter of what it was then. If Trump were shrewd, he would declare that his tough approach has been so successful that the wall is no longer necessary.

Instead, he used his prime-time TV appearance in a stubborn effort to stoke panic, citing the supposed threat of terrorists pouring in. But the administration's claim that thousands of suspected terrorists were seized trying to enter in 2017 has been exposed as thunderously irrelevant.

Almost all arrived on commercial airliners, which can easily pass over walls of any design, length or material. Only six foreigners on terrorist watchlists, it turns out, were nabbed at the southern land border.

Even that number overstates the phenomenon. Julian Sanchez, an analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, tweeted, "When you see 'on the terror watchlist,' don't imagine that actually means 'terrorist.' In most cases it means 'has name, possibly quite common, matching some sort of derogatory intel.' A supposed bad guy on some list or other shares my name; I get stopped often."

In 2017, the State Department acknowledged it had "no credible information that any member of a terrorist group has traveled through Mexico to gain access to the United States." Even if it were impossible to circumvent, the wall would block about as many Islamic State operatives as it would polar bears.

But the wall would not be impossible to circumvent. Trump has lauded the barrier erected on the border in San Diego as a model for his project, but the Congressional Research Service concluded that it "did not have a discernible impact on the influx of unauthorized aliens coming across the border in San Diego."

Faced with a wall, smugglers can bring in people in places not covered by the structure, through tunnels under it, in cars or commercial trucks passing through checkpoints, or over salt water. In 2017, the Border Patrol reported, 347 migrants were caught after trying to reach the California coast by boat, an option long used by Cubans and Haitians.

But most unauthorized foreigners don't need to find such routes. The majority of them travel here on valid temporary visas and then choose not to leave. For them, Trump's wall would be an extravagant exercise in missing the point.

The idea that there is a newfound emergency is contradicted by his own record. He pushed the wall as a presidential candidate, but the number of apprehensions on the southern border is lower today than it was then. Undocumented migration has been around for decades, at no overall harm to public safety or national security. States that attract lots of unauthorized foreigners typically see a decline in crime.

The recent surge of Central Americans may be a humanitarian crisis, but not one a wall would relieve. Foreigners who arrive at the border are legally entitled to request asylum. Central Americans fleeing rampant violence would keep doing so even if a 2,000-mile concrete barrier were in place.

Trump said piously that "America proudly welcomes millions of lawful immigrants who enrich our society and contribute to our nation." But he has pushed legislation that would reduce legal immigration by half. He has also slashed admissions of refugees.

Trump's proposed wall rests on the fantasy that the contiguous 48 states, whose perimeter extends 11,000 miles, can be sealed off from humans who desperately want to be here.

If we want to sharply reduce the number of foreigners coming illegally, there is one and only one plausible way to do it: sharply increase the number allowed to come legally.

Yet the administration spurns that option. Why? Because its real goal is keeping out foreigners, legal or otherwise.

In theory, Trump could honestly say that. But honesty is a habit he never acquired.