In Our Opinion: Border debate could use a dose of reality

June 27, 2018

The Trump administration's embattled "zero tolerance" policy of separating immigrant children from their parents after attempts to cross the U.S./Mexico border is unseemly at best, and at worst unconscionable. But perhaps equally disturbing has been the Orwellian attempt to whitewash the policy over the past week by White House and its supporters.

Trump at various times has insisted that the child-parent separation policy was either a necessary policy, a Democratic policy or not even a policy at all. He espoused the first position in a June 19 tweet, claiming: "(Democrats) don't care about crime and want illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country."

But his notion that the U.S. has no choice but to resort to draconian measures against a flood of crime-prone immigrants is based, quite simply, on lies. U.S. Customs and Border Enforcement reports that in the fiscal year 2017, the number of people found attempting to cross the U.S/Mexico border illegally fell to its lowest level in 46 years. Even before Trump's election, a 2015 Pew Research study based on census data indicated a net outflow of migrants from the U.S. to Mexico: while some 870,000 Mexicans came to the U.S. from 2009 to 2014, a little more than 1 million more left the U.S. to return to Mexico during the same time.

Two recent studies also suggest that immigrants — both legal and illegal — are significantly less likely than native-born Americans to commit crimes. A study of 2015 Texas Department of Public Safety data by the libertarian Cato Institute indicated that there were far fewer criminals among immigrants here illegally than U.S. citizens as a percentage of their respective populations. A study in the academic journal Criminology in March reached a similar conclusion, with the authors noting: "Increases in the undocumented immigrant population within states are associated with significant decreases in the prevalence of violence."

Trump on June 15 told reporters at the White House: "I hate the children being taken away. The Democrats have to change their law. That's their law."

Set aside for a moment the absurdity that a Republican president, with a Republican-controlled Congress and Republican-controlled Supreme Court, is powerless to reform immigration law in the face of minority Democratic resistance. Trump himself refuted this whopper last week with his executive order reversing the policy, despite claiming just days earlier that "you can't do it through an executive order," a position echoed by Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, who had insisted "Congress alone can fix it" earlier in the week.

Trump caved on the policy after the backlash against it became so overwhelming that only his most ardent propagandists remained willing to defend it, such as Fox News' Tucker Carlson, who in a manner reminiscent of North Korean state media urged: "If you're looking to understand what's actually happening in this country, always assume the opposite of whatever they're telling you on the big news stations." (Fox colleague Seth MacFarlane, a comedian, retorted: "In other words, don't think critically, don't consult multiple news sources, and in general, don't use your brain. Just blindly obey Fox News.")

It's no wonder the Trump administration has gone to great lengths to hide its shame. Journalists attempting to visit child detention sites have been forbidden from carrying cameras or turned back altogether. Sen. Jeff Merkley of Oregon was refused entry to such a site in Brownsville, Texas, last week, as were Sen. Bob Graham and Rep. Debbie Wasserman-Schultz at a site in Homestead, Florida.

The malodorous, unvarnished truth is that Trump's administration was caught using children as pawns to gain leverage in his feud with Congress over funding for his border wall vanity project. It's still possible to buy what this administration is selling on immigration, but doing so requires suspension of disbelief, willful ignorance and a cult-like devotion to shameless purveyors of disinformation.