Steve and Cokie Roberts column: The price of rejecting reality

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One of President Trump's most persistent and pernicious lies is that immigrants cause an increase in crime. That's not true. So his whole approach to immigration is rooted in a falsehood, and that makes rational decision-making virtually impossible.

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"We're making decisions based not on facts and data, but on emotion, preference, grievance, loyalty, tribalism," former CIA director Michael Hayden told CBS.

Rep. Mark Sanford, who was defeated in a Republican primary after he crossed Trump, warned in the Washington Post, "We have become so desensitized to the president's tortured relationship with the truth that we don't challenge the inaccurate things he and others say. There should be consequences to making things up. But inexplicably, as a society, we have somehow fallen into collective amnesia that it doesn't matter when the highest officeholder in the land doesn't tell the truth."

As a candidate, Trump denounced Mexican immigrants as "rapists" and drug smugglers, and he's continued that incendiary — and inaccurate — rhetoric into his presidency. Recently he warned about "murderers and thieves and so much else" who are "invading" and "infesting" the country, and staged a White House event featuring victims of immigrant criminals.

Those victims and criminals do exist, but Trump's campaign of fear deeply distorts the larger story. As the Post reports: "The social-science research on immigration and crime is clear: Undocumented immigrants are considerably less likely to commit crimes than native-born citizens, with immigrants legally in the United States even less likely to do so."

One study by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, examined Texas crime statistics for 2015 and concluded: "There were 56 percent fewer criminal convictions of illegal immigrants than of native-born Americans." For legal immigrants, the crime rate "was about 85 percent below the native-born rate."

A study in the journal Criminology published last March asked: "Do places with higher percentages of undocumented immigrants have higher rates of crime?" The answer, reports the Post, "is a resounding no."

Linking immigration to crime is only one falsehood Trump uses to justify his hardline policies. Another is that immigrants are bad for the economy, driving down wages and taking jobs away from native-born Americans.

That's not true either. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine reviewed 20 years of data and concluded, "Immigration has an overall positive impact on long-run economic growth in the U.S."

Demographic trends make this finding more valid and vital than ever. The surge of retiring baby boomers — about 10,000 turn 65 every day — comes as U.S. birth rates are plummeting to historic lows. These two developments place the country's economic safety net in grave danger. The best answer to that threat: more young, hardworking, tax-paying immigrants — not fewer.

Gerald F. Seib, writing in the Wall Street Journal, concludes: "There is a good case that America's economy — growing and thriving — has never needed immigrant labor more than it does now."

And yet this president, with his "tortured relationship with the truth," ignores these facts and follows policies that make the problem worse instead of better. He wants to build a wall across the southern border to keep out these potential taxpayers, while deporting the undocumented workers who are already here and even reducing legal immigration.

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency has recently raided meat-packing plants, gardening companies and even 7-Eleven stores in search of illegal laborers. With unemployment below 4 percent, who, exactly, does this president think is going to replace those workers? Native-born Americans? Good luck with that.

Trump is convinced that his ferocious anti-immigrant policies are popular with his political base. "I think I got elected largely because we are strong in the border," he recently told a rally in Nevada, and he's probably right about that.

But looking toward the fall elections, his hardline positions could backfire politically against the GOP. Gallup reports that a "record-high" number of Americans, 75 percent, "view immigration as good thing," while only 19 percent agree with Trump that it's a "bad thing."

Immigration is a good thing for America — morally as well as economically. And Sanford is right: There should be consequences for "making things up."