

CULPEPER STAR★EXPONENT

Your Hometown Newspaper

Trump's tribal immigration policies hit a wall of facts

A. Barton Hinkle

April 4, 2018

President Trump and his myrmidons are in a state over the possibility that a “caravan” of somewhere between 1,000 and 1,200 Latin Americans are heading north toward Mexico, and some percentage of them might travel so far as the United States. “Must build Wall,” Trump tweeted about this the other day. Wall good! Hulk like Wall.

As of this writing, Trump has posted 10 tweets on immigration since the first of the month, which is the equivalent of a Ph.D. dissertation for anyone else. Like so many things the president utters, though, his immigration tweets are not on good terms with the truth.

He says the caravan and other migrants from the south represent a “massive inflow” of people. But border crossings have fallen sharply, and about the caravan a Border Patrol agent says: “Not to be flippant, but it’s similar numbers to what we are seeing every day pretty much.”

Trump says illegal aliens bring “drugs and crime.” As Cato Institute scholar Alex Nowrasteh has pointed out, “The vast majority of research finds that immigrants do not increase local crime rates and that they are less likely to cause crime and less likely to be incarcerated than their native-born peers.” Besides: A wall would do almost nothing to stanch the flow of illegal drugs into the U.S., most of which comes through legal ports of entry.

The president laments that “our country is being stolen!” Which doesn’t hold up under even a moment’s scrutiny. In any other milieu, having more people join qualifies as a good thing. A thousand new members of the Republican Party? Sign them up. A record-breaking freshman class at State U.? All the better for State U.

The reverse is also true: Here in Virginia, it is cause for alarm that more people are moving out of the state than moving into it — and that has been the case for four years running. It is cause for alarm because a slow or negative rate of population growth impedes economic growth. Economic growth is a function of two factors: worker productivity and population. It is not surprising that Trump fails to grasp this, given his associated belief that Americans can be made better off by using tariffs to raise the price of things Americans want to buy.

More immigration is better for America economically for a second reason: Immigrants are more likely to start a business than native-born Americans. Harvard Business Review reports that “immigrants constitute 15 percent of the general U.S. workforce, but they account for around a quarter of U.S. entrepreneurs.”

(Pre-emptive retort to rebuttals: While Trump lately has focused on illegal immigration, that focus is part of a general hostility to immigration overall: He supports proposals to cut legal immigration in half and to make it harder for refugees to obtain asylum, for instance.)

The president's fans like to echo his claim that "a nation without borders is not a nation at all." An editorial Tuesday in The Washington Examiner went so far as to contend that "border enforcement isn't any old aspect of law enforcement. Democratic self-determination and the rule of law hinge on it. ... In a democratic nation, self-determination includes determining who is part of the nation. If we really believe in the ideas of the Enlightenment, then we have to believe in self-determining, democratic nations. That means we have to believe in immigration control."

The Enlightenment? Zowie.

Pause for a moment to unpack this. Sure, geographic limits help define a political entity. But it hardly follows that controlling who crosses those boundaries is a necessary condition for democracy and self-determination. If that were the case, then every one of America's 50 states would lack both.

States let people move freely across the border all the time. They don't issue visas. They don't require passports. They don't make buying a house or taking a job contingent on legal residency. And yet even states with large immigrant populations, such as California, New York, Florida, Arizona, and Texas, somehow manage to sustain vibrant democratic traditions. (The Enlightenment seems to be getting along OK, too.)

By Trump's tribalist logic, people who move from New York to Georgia are trying to "steal" Georgia, and Georgians would be much better off if they built a wall around the Peach State, slashed the number of people moving into it, and imposed steep taxes on anything made outside of it.

It's too bad we can't build a wall to protect America from that kind of foolishness.