

Separating children from asylum seekers unconscionable

It is outrageous that we have to declare in print that children should not be traumatized and discarded for political gain. But this abuse is exactly what our government is doing in our name.

The contribution of immigrants to our country has always been a supporting pillar in our values as Americans. Today, we are facing an attack on those fundamental values, one shrouded in political jargon but nonetheless following the playbook of isolationism, xenophobia and racism.

The Trump administration has issued a “zero tolerance” policy on people trying to enter the United States, including those seeking asylum. Before this policy, people caught crossing the Mexican border illegally were detained and then sent back across the border. The new policy, announced by U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, is that all illegal crossers, including asylum seekers, will be prosecuted by the Department of Homeland Security and charged with a felony, facing months in prison, while their children are sent to juvenile detention facilities. Reports say hundreds of children have been removed from their parent’s protection and placed in the hands of the Department of Human Services.

In Sessions’ words, “If you are smuggling a child, then we will prosecute you and that child will be separated from you as required by law. If you don’t like that, then don’t smuggle children over our border.”

And just like that, people migrating from Latin America are labeled wholesale as felons and smugglers, better suited to the abject poverty and violence they “chose” to escape.

There’s great political capital in that language, even before a single arrest. Organizations like the Center for Immigration Studies, the propaganda arm for the anti-immigrant movement, are firing up their members with this rhetoric. CIS has been labeled a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center for repeated circulation of white supremacist, anti-Semitic and racist material. This is the channel people who demonize and scapegoat immigrants turn to, including the Federation for American Immigration Reform. FAIR is the national organization backing local efforts to repeal Oregon’s sanctuary state status, which bars local law enforcement officials from doing the work of federal immigration officers.

And in front of CIS is where the nation’s leading immigration official, Thomas Homan, the acting director of the nation’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, gave a speech on Tuesday. Despite calls for him to cancel the engagement, Homan took the stage, giving credibility to an organization that spreads “abhorrent viewpoints, including white supremacy and anti-Semitism,” according to one congressman’s plea.

This same organization is where Trump has selected his next assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, Richard Mortenson.

But let’s not start going through the list of

this administration’s selections. There are children waiting.

On Sunday, June 3, the personal impact of this policy was put into the spotlight as Oregon’s U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley stood outside an immigrant detention facility in Brownsville, Texas, to decry the treatment of families seeking asylum in the United States. That experience, as he was denied entrance, has become a viral video online. During his trip, Merkley was allowed access to a processing facility – a first-stop for immigrants detained managed by the Department of Homeland Security – and described the harsh conditions he saw there.

Over this past weekend, staffers with U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez, (D-N.J.), were also denied entrance to an immigrant detention facility in California, despite prior requests for access.

Trump blames an unspecified law created by Democrats for the actions.

However, Merkley and legal experts say there is no legal requirement that children be taken from their families. This is a strategy to keep people from Central and South America from entering the country, even for legal protection under U.S. law.

“It’s a new policy not aimed at border security,” Merkley said in a phone press conference on Tuesday. “It’s a policy to punish and deter those people coming to the border illegally. But the application for asylum is guaranteed by law.”

In lieu of constructive immigration reform, we’ve been given a policy to inflict pain on children as a means for blocking certain people, specifically people

from Central and South America, from seeking asylum in the United States.

“It’s morally bankrupt. It’s wrong on every level,” said Merkley. “You don’t hurt children in order to influence the policy choices of their parents.”

The New York Times reported in April that it has data showing more than 700 children have been taken from adults claiming to be their parents since October, including more than 100 children under the age of 4. The ACLU has filed a class-action lawsuit against federal immigration bureaus to stop the practice of separating children from their parents.

Merkley’s been criticized for creating a publicity stunt. Regardless, he and Menendez make an important point that we shouldn’t be kept in the dark about the human toll extracted by our immigration policies.

Members of Congress should be able to visit, on 24-hour notice, any detention facility in America. As Merkley said, we shouldn’t have to wait weeks for access – for a “Potemkin moment,” referring to the euphemism for a manifestation intended to deceive people into thinking something is better than it really is.

We won’t stand for this. We won’t be lied to and kept in the dark about the real-life consequences behind this administration’s destructive actions.

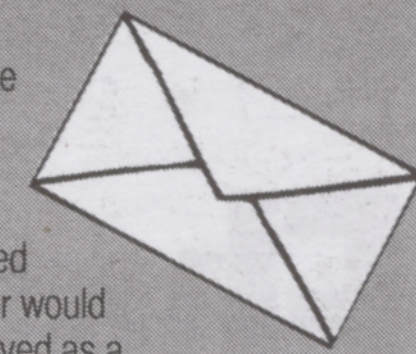
Demand that this administration stop using children as pawns in its war against Latino immigrants, and support our representatives in their effort to raise the curtain on our immigration procedures. What we don’t know hurts all of us, especially the vulnerable among us.

EDITORIAL

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