

Convenient Demonologies: Stopping Migrant Caravans

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President Donald J. Trump has been engaged with berating human caravans, a spectacle that might have been odd in another era. At first instance, it all seems fundamentally anachronistic, a sort of history in reverse. It was, after all, the caravan packed with invasive pioneers that gave the United States its distinct frontier identity, moving with relentless, exterminating purpose in ultimately closing it.

On October 19, some 7,000 Central American migrants, mostly from Honduras and Guatemala, made an attempt to cross the bridge between Guatemala and Mexico. “Una necesidad nos obliga,” came the [justification](#) of a 20-year old man to the *Washington Post*. The ultimate destination for most: the United States.

Such a necessity does not merely apply to states in social and political decay. Honduras has historically been an eviscerated client state, its politics those of a marionette of Washington’s interests. In similar fashion, Guatemala continues to bleed before the preying involvement of Washington in its history. The US-owned United Fruit Company craved gangsters for capitalism, and the Central Intelligence Agency obliged in protecting its assets, assisting the overthrow of the Arbenz administration in 1954.

The Mexican authorities made various attempts to repel the human stream with violent though modest success. With the November mid-term elections looming, this small group became electoral dynamite for Trump. It gave him a chance to [militarise](#) matters, announcing the deployment of 5,200 troops to the US-Mexico border. (Some 5,600 have currently taken their positions.)

The language of General Terrence John O’Shaughnessy, in describing the proposed plan, resembled a description of an armed operation against an elevated enemy.

“Our concept of operations is to flow in our military assets with a priority to build up southern Texas, and then Arizona, and then California.”

In the [words](#) of the previous US president, Barack Obama,

“They’re telling us the single most grave threat to America is a bunch of poor, impoverished, broke, hungry refugees a thousand miles away.”

Film director Spike Lee, [presenting](#) his latest effort, *BlackKkKlansman*, at the Los Cabos International Film Festival in Mexico, was even more unvarnished.

“Agent Orange was on the campaign trail for his fellow gangsters and stirring his base by saying the migrant caravan was his invasion.”

If there is something that tickles and engages the populist sentiment, Trump is up for it. His “base”, as it were, is up for rocking, chilling and entertaining. Obama might accuse Trump of being a fan of the “political stunt”, but that is the essence of this administration, a sequence of aggravated rehearsals that have distracted when needed and enraged when required.

Some of these ploys have gone beyond the category of temporary fancy. Senior policy advisor Stephen Miller had demonstrated that policies of indignation can have purchase at chance moments. While Trump is always bound to claim copyright over such ideas, it was Miller who proved influential in sketching the selective Muslim ban and the head-scratching policy of separating children from parents at the border. Immigration is being larded with further, stifling regulations with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [confirming](#) that a mere 30,000 refugees for resettlement will be accepted by the US in 2019.

Such cruel exercises are the stuff of modern reactionary politics, notably from governments wishing to remove the clammy hand of international law upon them. Refugees, the outsiders, the marginalised, are ideal fodder to mince and grind. It is the language of Australian Prime Minister John Howard who, in the federal elections of 2001, [insisted](#) that the island continent would become an impregnable fortress against the undesirables coming by sea. He illustrated this fact by deploying, much in the Trump manner, soldiers against refugees stranded at sea in August 2001. “We simply cannot allow a situation to develop where Australia is seen around the world as a country of easy destination.” Given Australia’s lethal natural barriers, the remarks were as incongruous as they were fictional.

It was a policy twinned with the feather brained notion, ruthlessly exploited, that terrorist operatives might sneak their way to Australia on leaky vessels, avoiding more salubrious options. As Australia’s defence minister Peter Reith brazenly [asserted](#) at that time, such boat arrivals “can be a pipeline for terrorists to come in and use your country as a staging post for terrorist activities”. Howard himself added taste to the fear: “you don’t know whether they have terrorist links or not,” he suggested rather casually to Brisbane’s *Courier Mail*.

Trump would have approved of such laxity, having himself [claimed](#), with an approach immune to evidence, that there might well be “unknown Middle Easterners” heading to the US in these migrant caravans. When probed on the matter by CNN’s now bedevilled Jim Acosta, Trump twisted slightly. “There’s no proof of anything but they could very well be.”

Trump’s language of the demonised caravan is also the language of a host of European leaders who have decided to dust off chauvinistic sentiments long held in the archive and ignore any central, humanitarian approach to refugees. At work here is a species of depraved transatlantic consensus on cruelty propelled by strongman bullying. Hungary’s Viktor Orbán fantasises about Muslim hordes in an Ottoman invasion redux, a positioning that elevates himself as defender of the West against Islam and the dark forces of the barbaric East. “We don’t see these people as Muslim refugees,” he snorted in an [interview](#) with *Bild* in January this year. “We see them as Muslim invaders.”

Other states contemplate a further entrenched, barbed wire approach, finding much value in shirking or adjusting the refugee resettlement quota. Poland can add itself to Hungary in

that regard, with Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki [stating](#) his position plainly to Radio Poland in January that “we will not be allowing migrants from the Middle East and North Africa to enter Poland.” Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are not far behind.

Like his Australian and several European counterparts, Trump has deployed the instruments of violence and demonization against refugees with a degree of commitment and, it must not be forgotten, success. It also supplies a fitful reminder how criticising him for doing so remains a more difficult exercise, given the number of states which have gotten a cold regarding refugees. A certain villainy against humanity has taken hold.

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