



Why President Trump's Racially Charged Immigration Rhetoric and Policies Are so Dangerous

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President Donald Trump's rhetoric, as well as his administration's immigration policies, exhibit xenophobic prejudice against people from other countries, especially immigrants or refugees of color. His efforts focus narrowly on enforcement and are clothed in divisive "us-versus-them" messages that hearken back to such dark episodes in the American past, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the internment of an estimated 120,000 Japanese immigrants and citizens during WW II.

Zeroing in on Mexicans

Where Mexican immigrants in particular are concerned, Trump's anti-immigrant stances have been broadcast since 2015, when Trump launched his presidential campaign by declaring "...When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... They're sending people that have lots of problems... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists..." In this racist diatribe, Trump stirred anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant sentiments that are clearly important to a significant segment of the American electorate.

The dark history of racism against African Americans is well known, but many Americans know less about racist policies long faced by immigrants and citizens of Mexican heritage. This long and sad history stretches back to the 1800s, when the United States waged an imperialist war between 1846 and 1848 against Mexico in which half of Mexican territory was seized. Nearly a century later, as Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez recount in their insightful book *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, an estimated one million individuals of Mexican heritage, about three-fifths of them being U.S. citizens, were forcibly deported. Similarly, in the 1950s, then-President Dwight D. Eisenhower launched "Operation Wetback," which deported over one million immigrants and citizens of Mexican heritage.

The Eugenicist Underpinnings of Anti-Mexican Sentiments

Inspired by President Eisenhower, Trump praised "Operation Wetback," sending a clear message to his white nativist base that his administration's immigration policies would focus narrowly on enforcement measures and resurrect mass deportations seen throughout the 20th Century. More troubling than his rhetoric, or even the possibility that he may resurrect past policies, is the return to eugenicist premises in the speeches and policies of President Trump and key officials in his administration. Coined by Victorian era academic Francis Galton, the pseudoscience of eugenics holds that in order to "advance" the human "race," white individuals with "good" or "desirable" traits and genes should only reproduce with each other.

Throughout history, supporters of eugenics programs, such as Nazi leaders in Germany and neo-Nazis' in the United States, have made the racist claim that the Aryan "race" – referring to people with white skin and
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especially those who are blonde and blue-eyed – is genetically superior to other races. Prior to the rise of Nazism, white Americans used eugenics to argue that they were superior to African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans and Asian Americans. For example, to justify racist policies like residential segregation and whites-only spaces, which systematically excluded African Americans, white American leaders and citizens claimed that whites were biologically superior to blacks. This idea persists to this day.

Describing the plight of undocumented youth in an [op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*](#), author and journalist Michael D'Antonio connects Trump's decision to end Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) to eugenics. This program, which continues thanks to the courts, provides temporary protection from deportation, along with work permits, to qualified undocumented youth whose parents had brought them to the United States in childhood. D'Antonio points out that "there is another distinction that sets Dreamers apart, of course: Most of them are from Mexico, and they are not white." Moreover, he argues that Trump's move to end DACA can "be understood within the historical context of America's exclusionary immigration policies, the bulk of which have relied on the "pseudoscience of eugenics" to decide who can stay in a "white" society and who must leave or be excluded.

Trump has played heavily into such an "us-versus-them" mentality or political strategy throughout his presidential campaign and into to the present. Whether he is talking about Mexican immigrants, Muslim Americans or African American athletes who – as a protest against police violence – refuse to stand for the National Anthem, Trump has focused on building walls that divide white Americans from non-white Americans and supposedly protect a fortress America from the rest of the world. His rhetoric and policies are jarring in an era when what is needed are bridges, not walls.

Can America Learn from Past Mistakes and Avoid Repeating Them?

Even though Trump won the presidency without a majority of the 2016 votes, many Americans have clearly bought into his racist message. Almost 63 million Americans voted for him instead of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who offered a more inclusive message. (Not that she doesn't have her own political faults or dark past in terms of people of color.) Furthermore, few of Trump's voters seemed troubled when, according to the *Washington Post*, the President disparaged immigrants from El Salvador, Haiti and African countries by posing the question: "Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?" To remove any doubt of his racist intent, Trump simultaneously speculated about bringing more immigrants instead from overwhelmingly white countries like Norway.

By facing the troubling racial underpinnings of Trump's rhetoric and policy positions on immigration, civic leaders and citizens/residents can better understand his draconian policy decisions in other areas, including his isolationist foreign policy – and the negative repercussions it may well have for America's future. For example, Trump's insistence that Mexico, an otherwise friendly nation, will pay for the southern border wall he promised during his campaign is sure to hurt U.S. trade relations and limit its leadership in global affairs – especially when Mexico and other disparaged countries will turn to other viable trading partners, such as China, Japan and the European Union.

In short, unless and until Trump and his like-minded Vice President leave office, including his morally bankrupt administration, America will continue to face the danger of repeating the country's most racist and self-destructive policies – in an era of global affairs when outreach and tolerance, not pulling back into isolationism and intolerance, are the keys to America's future success.

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Read more in Alvaro Huerta, *Reframing the Latino Immigration Debate: Towards a Humanistic Paradigm* (San Diego State University Press, 2013).