

## **“These Parents, Themselves, Are Using These Children as Pawns”: The Politicization of Childhood at the U.S.-Mexico Border**

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By investigating cable news coverage of Donald Trump’s family separation policy at the U.S.-Mexico border, this article analyzes how colorblindness and American exceptionalism came to be the uniform framing of these stories across *Fox News*, *MSNBC*, and *CNN* in the summer of 2018. Through qualitative content analysis and critical textual analysis of one month of news coverage, I argue that this policy’s impact at the intersection of childhood and race prompted a series of self-corrections on the part of newscasters and invited guests to maintain a cohesive narrative of a colorblind nation that loves children and is decidedly not racist. I explore a confluence of the imagined nation, the racist nation-state, and colorblind ideology as an explanation for why ideologically diverse news outlets would broadcast the same, ultimately patriotic messaging in a moment of panic over U.S. national identity.

*Keywords: family separation, immigration, racism, cable news, U.S. nationalism*

In late June 2018, Getty Images photographer John Moore captured a photo in McAllen, Texas, that appeared on front pages internationally. At the height of the U.S.-Mexico border crisis, Moore’s picture of a toddler sobbing, which was printed as evidence of the trauma caused by Trump’s family separation policy, sparked more than simply outrage. It kickstarted an \$18 million fundraiser to help reunite families (Schmidt & Phillips, 2018), and it appeared on the July 2, 2018, cover of *TIME*, photoshopped next to an imposing image of Donald Trump with the foreboding message “Welcome to America” (*TIME*, 2018). The problem, however, was this: According to her father, the crying Honduran girl was not separated from her family; she was more than likely simply tired and upset after the extraordinarily difficult journey of migrating to the border.

After this corrective story broke, the Trump White House, as well as many news outlets that had utilized the image, were quick to respond: “‘It’s shameful that Dems and the media exploited this photo of a little girl to push their agenda,’ White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders tweeted . . . ‘She was not separated from her mom. The separation here is from the facts’” (Schmidt & Phillips, 2018, para. 6). This battle over who was “using” these children, and for what purposes, was a rhetorical strategy

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deployed by both the political left and right at the height of the family separation crisis. The responses to this image in particular could serve as a metonymy for the situation as a whole: finger pointing, “gotcha” moments, and knee-jerk emotional reactions continued through Trump’s June 20, 2018, decision to reverse his own family separation policy.

The stakes of this question of blame were extremely high: More than 5,000 children were separated from their families, and the documentation necessary to reunite these children was often broken and scattered. Siblings were forced apart, children were mistreated, and psycho-emotional trauma ensued (Bennett & Dickerson, 2022). As Congress and the nation scrambled to address this matter, a pattern emerged: While political agents were assigning fault, presumably to hold accountable those who were able to change this policy, these children were again and again referred to as “pawns”—“pawns” used by immigrant families, “pawns” used by Trump, “pawns” used by the left, “pawns” used by the right.

With this sentiment as the focal point of this study, I investigate the discursive life of this rhetoric and its uncanny ability to reiterate national identity during a time of turmoil. Focusing on news coverage from *Fox News*, *CNN*, and *MSNBC*, I argue that the United States’ self-image so heavily relies upon its “city upon a hill” conceptions that American exceptionalism—an ideology completely blind to race and xenophobia—was the main argument used on both sides of a heavily polarized political aisle during the 2018 family separation fallout. When Democrats and Republicans could agree on nothing else, they expressed a shared understanding that this policy “is not who we are” as a nation—although based on our histories of imperialism, incarceration, and internment, this sentiment does not stand up to criticism.

## Literature Review

### ***Donald Trump, Family Separation, and the Summer of 2018***

With the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, rhetoric surrounding immigration as a practice, and immigrants as people, in the United States rapidly changed (Heuman & González, 2018). There has long been vitriol against the “Other” in this country, but the candor with which people could speak had shifted: Until Trump’s election, the social move toward colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) as the accepted form of racism meant that people had learned—consciously or unconsciously—to self-police the racialized opinions that they explicitly stated. However, a base of people who support Donald Trump found new freedom to express overt bigotry in a style that mimicked the President of the United States, and there is evidence to suggest that racism and anti-immigrant sentiment were “important determinants” of a Trump vote (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018).

“Make America Great Again,” the rallying call of his 2016 election marketing, had clear stakes in anti-immigrant sentiment, as evidenced by another favorite slogan, “Build the Wall.” Trump campaign rallies erupted in cheers at suggestions of limiting “illegals” and taking a hardline stance on militarization at the U.S.-Mexico border (Wallace & Zepeda-Millán, 2020). Trump’s version of “zero tolerance” immigration policies came with his decision—not an existing legal framework, as the Trump administration claimed—to prosecute and separate families at the border, holding children away from their parents indefinitely (Yen & Woodward, 2019). This infamous decision brought U.S.-Mexico immigration rhetoric to a boiling point in the summer of 2018.

Leading up to June 20, 2018, the day that Donald Trump reversed his own family separation policy, palpable tension regarding immigration was building. The discovery of “children in cages” shocked the nation into critical conversation on this topic, and photos, videos, and sound recordings from border detention camps were regularly released on both social media and traditional media outlets (Graham, 2018). As this evidence rolled out, Trump doubled down on his position: family separation is law, immigrants are breaking the law, only Congress can reverse the law, and the family separation policy had been inherited from Obama. He repeatedly claimed, “When I became president, President Obama had a separation policy. I didn’t have it. He had it. I brought the families together. I’m the one that put them together” (Cummings, 2019, para. 3).

Although Trump was often vague about which “law” he inherited from Obama, it is widely assumed he was pointing to the 1997 Flores Settlement, which his administration was actively looking to overturn (Cummings, 2019). This settlement, borne from the *Flores v. Reno* case, seeks to ensure the well-being of undocumented immigrant minors, accompanied by immediate family or not, in “least restrictive setting[s]” (Congressional Research Service, 2021, para. 3) during their detention, with prompt release and placement with family when possible. Legislating terms such as time limits for detention, custody arrangements, and safety/health compliance within holding facilities, *Flores*, to the contrary of Trump’s assertions, is hard-won legislation that focuses specifically on reuniting children with families and attending to child welfare (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

Of note, Obama did have his fair share of public controversy surrounding his handling of child immigrants, too. In fact, Trump claimed again and again that Obama had built the children’s “cages” for which he was being politically lampooned, and that was true. However, in saying that, he was attempting to equate his family separation policy with Obama’s immigration strategy, which is a false parallel (Galli, 2023; Miroff, 2020). Though Obama did have harsh deportation practices, he was not guilty of separating families (Briggs, 2020).

Differently than Obama, Trump pointed to *Flores* as the “bad law” that required family separation because he was insisting, among other things, that *Flores* meant families could not be released together. According to the Trump administration, when children were detained at the border with immediate family, the children had to be released after 20 days because of *Flores*, but the adult family members did not—separating them indefinitely while the adults remained in detention. These newly released and now “unaccompanied” minors were either taken to different facilities or placed with sponsors or fosters, as per the settlement (Lind & Scott, 2018). As we now know, this process was not well tracked and ultimately resulted in the permanent destruction of hundreds of families who still, in 2023, have not been reunited with their children (Bennett, Khan, & Midura, 2023). Thus, Trump’s claims about inheriting a family separation law from Obama were wholly false, and concern over child detainment, and the spaces in which it was happening, continued to grow over the spring and summer of 2018.

During this time, politicians were visiting these child detainment facilities, variously reporting on their horror or their alleged necessity, and powerful world authorities, including Pope Francis and the United Nations, condemned the United States for this practice (Onyanga-Omara, 2018). Photo, video, and audio

evidence of children in cage-like structures, as well as proof of their emotional distress, were being shared widely across news and social media platforms, ratcheting up the debate on American ethics and “who we are” as a country. As these media proliferated, the American public, as a whole, rejected this separation practice: A 2019 survey found that only 6% of the general public supported this immigration policy (Wallace & Zepeda-Millán, 2020). In the midst of these raging debates, the same rhetoric surfaced time and time again on both the political right and left: children as pawns.

As this study will show, the political right was variously blaming immigrant families and Democrats for using these children as pawns. Regarding families, they argued that immigrant parents either (a) used their children to access more lenient treatment upon crossing the border or (b) irresponsibly sent their children, alone, with dangerous “coyotes” who claimed familial ties at the border for the same reasons. Regarding Democrats, right-leaning media outlets and personalities accused the left of using the emotionally charged plight of children to push liberal immigration policies to vote on the floor of Congress, thus turning these children into pawns.

By contrast, this study suggests that the left blamed Republicans as a whole, and/or Trump in particular, for using children as pawns in their quest for more restrictive immigration policies. By separating children from their families, they were, the argument went, using children as a deterrence strategy for others considering illegally crossing into the United States. This stance was variously confirmed or denied by a very disorganized White House. On one hand, Trump was denying the validity of this statement while on the other, senior advisor Stephen Miller and Chief of Staff John Kelly were confirming it (Bump, 2018).

Given these contradictory stances, it is surprising that this study finds the ultimate messaging from both right and left ideological angles in the news was the same: “This policy is not who we are as a nation, and it must be stopped.” What could account for this cohesion in the face of so much polarization?

### ***Imagining the Nation: Anderson, the “American Dream,” and Racism***

Benedict Anderson’s (2006) well-known work on “imagined communities” theorizes nationalism beyond the confines of the traditional nativistic sense of the word, which, according to him, explains why conceptions of “the nation” have persisted for so long. A nation, Anderson (2006) argues, “is an imagined political community . . . because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives an image of their communion” (p. 6). Importantly, the nation “is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 2006, p. 7).

For the present discussion, it is important to note that, among a host of other historical antecedents, Anderson (2006) argues that the nation was primarily able to be imagined through media objects: first religious texts, then novels and newspapers. News has been, and continues to be, a vehicle for imagining the national community because we have created a ritual around its consumption, positioning ourselves as in community with others in our own nation and relative to those around the world. Anderson

(2006) argues that the affective kinship with the nation that one feels is largely borne out through the consumption of news, and it can be described as the “style” of nationalism in any given place.

A governing “style” of nationalism in the United States can be found in the ever-invoked American Dream, because it is a rhetoric that has fueled U.S. self-conception for centuries. The American Dream, first popularized by historian James Truslow Adams, posits, among other things, that the United States is overflowing with equality of opportunity and abundant chances for success regardless of social positionality: if you’re willing to work hard, you can live the dream. The American Dream closely ties to ideals of American exceptionalism, in which the United States is imagined as a beacon of hope for other nations, a “city upon a hill” to be looked upon for its benevolence, wisdom, and democracy (Terrio, 2015). However, this laudable imagined nation is severely undercut by the racist structures of the nation-state that have existed from its very conception. As has been well documented, the U.S. nation-state is also a White nation-state (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Goldberg, 2002). White supremacy structures state authority at its very core, and so the terms that we have available to “imagine” ourselves within are inherently limited, even as the ideals of the imagined nation professes to be accessible to all those willing to work hard.

Because of this profound mismatch between the reality of the political landscape and the imagined value system of the nation, recognizing racism has always been an uncomfortable subject for the modern U.S. nation-state, both by its institutional structures and by its people. The moment we are now in, the era of colorblindness, means that it has fallen out of style to outwardly perform racism—although this has arguably shifted within some factions of the Republican party with the rise of Donald Trump–style conservatism, as per Heuman & González (2018)—and racism now occurs “without racists” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). “Shielded by color blindness,” sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2018) theorizes, “whites can express resentment toward minorities; criticize their morality, values, and work ethic; and even claim to be the victims of ‘reverse racism’” (p. 4). This colorblind racism, I will argue, plays a massive role in the way that the White U.S. nation-state still manages to construct its imagined national community, vis-à-vis news coverage, around ideals of equal opportunity and moral exceptionalism in the face of global backlash against an obviously racist event: brown children in cages at the southern border.

### ***The Political Weaponization of Children***

As outlined earlier, maintaining an imagined community is a highly political act, and though it may not appear to be so, childhood is a highly political space. Children have long been connected to innocence and tranquility, and though these constructions are more so adult fabricated than truly lived, they are social constructions that heavily influence the ways the United States feels (and legislates) that children should be treated (James & Prout, 2015; Jenks, 2005). Given that children and childhood hold heavy affective and emotional weight (Dogra, 2015), it is no small matter when children and/or childhood(s) are in the political spotlight.

The insistence on what childhood “should be” is so heavily moralizing that when evidence is revealed of crimes against children, there is often both domestic and international outcry (Irom, 2019). Thus, when faced with undeniable evidence of Trump’s child detention policies, the nation demanded that something be done: These children, now made visible, were not to be casualties of Trump’s war on

immigration. However, I will argue that because the United States—as a White nation-state—does not have a willingness or a vocabulary to openly speak on its racist violences, addressing the issue of family separation of Latinx children took complicated forms in news media coverage.

Migrant child detainment is not new in the United States, and indeed it is so common a practice that “baby jails” is a colloquial term used among immigration lawyers for the facilities that house these minors (Schrag, 2020, p. 5). On its face, the mere existence of “baby jails” would seem unthinkable, and so the specific social positionality of immigrant children is a space that merits unpacking: The othering of immigrants, particularly non-White immigrants (Cacho, 2012), does not sit easily with the sanctity of childhood. Jacqueline Bhabha (2014) investigates the peculiar social circumstance of refugee and asylum-seeking children, noting:

Children fleeing persecution would seem to have a peculiarly strong claim to protection, placed as they are at the intersection of two distinctly vulnerable populations, refugees and children. . . . Prevention of violence at a minimum would seem to mandate protective intervention. And yet . . . a severely restrictive immigration climate propels states to impose exclusionary measures. (p. 205)

She interrogates why migrant children often encounter a lack of support from the state at best, and overt hostility at worst, even while there is international consensus on their right to protection. Ultimately, she claims that it is because of “official ambivalence”: an institutional refusal to fully understand the specific protection needs of children in ways that differ from adults, and a lack of willingness to reevaluate how existing policy might not attend to children’s needs (Bhabha, 2014). Still, this does not answer the question of why: Why, for these highly vulnerable children, do the protections of childhood not apply?

Susan Terrio (2015) argues this is because detained immigrant children sit at the intersection of two competing systems of governance: humanitarianism and state security. Though global humanitarian rights and protections for children were formally adopted by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the United States notably signed but did not ratify, state security is a far more well-funded endeavor with deep political implications (Terrio, 2015). Migrant status and the rightlessness that comes along with it (Cacho, 2012) seemingly outweighs the status of “child” in the case of U.S. detention—that is until the media event of the *empathetic* child migrant moral panic returns (Irom, 2019).

As I argue, this “official ambivalence” was uniquely disrupted in the case of Trump’s family separation policy not only because baby jails started receiving media attention but also because these children were non-White. As Laura Briggs (2020) argues, a child taking is a systematic way of re-creating forms of racialized rightlessness that has occurred in many different iterations throughout U.S. history. This study analyzes this specific child-taking event, one which depicted Latinx children crying in “cages,” separated from their families, and how a White, but colorblind, nation-state projected a narrative of this moment that still fit within its self-imagined identity.

### Methodology

*Fox News*, *CNN*, and *MSNBC* were specifically chosen for this study for their ideological leanings: *Fox*, right; *CNN*, moderate left; and *MSNBC*, left (Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017). This range of bias allows for a wider discursive understanding of the affordances and constructions of this sentiment—children as pawns—in the 2018 family separation crisis. Because Trump reversed his family separation order on June 20, 2018, I collected all available *Fox News*, *CNN*, and *MSNBC* transcripts from Factiva<sup>2</sup> from May 20, 2018, to June 20, 2018, that mentioned “immigrant,” “immigrants,” or “immigration.” Of these articles, only those that specifically mentioned family separation at the U.S.-Mexico border were included in the data set. This resulted in 523 total transcripts, with 115 from *Fox*, 322 from *CNN*, and 86 from *MSNBC*. The speech of both show hosts/newscasters and invited guests were captured to better articulate a holistic understanding of the ways this sentiment moved through each station’s discursive space. Qualitatively coding (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017) these selections to saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Morse, 1995), I identified each station’s (a) ideological constructions of fault, or who was using these children as “pawns”;<sup>3</sup> (b) framing of why these children were being used as pawns; and (c) explanations for why this “use” was morally or ethically wrong. In what follows, these findings, as well as a critical textual analysis of exemplary moments of these discursive constructions, are discussed and tied to the larger questions of race and nation building in the United States at this moment of crisis.

### Framing Blame: The Political Uses of Childhood at the U.S.-Mexico Border

#### *Fox News*

Throughout much of the Trump presidency, *Fox* had been the ideological home for both Trump and his supporters (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). It is unsurprising, then, that *Fox*’s framing of the family separation issue closely matched Trump’s: family separation is law; we are a nation of laws; we inherited a bad law from Obama that Democrats are refusing to overturn in Congress. Thus, *Fox* was walking a thin line in the moments that they expressed uneasiness over the family separation policy, and this tightrope walk led to perhaps the most varied and complex rhetorical strategies of all three stations.

Before analyzing this complexity, however, there were many stories that straightforwardly echoed the Trump administration’s framing of this narrative. For example, in the opening of Sean Hannity’s June 18, 2018, report, he stated:

We’ll also dive into the media’s new favorite obsession, the so-called policy of separating illegal immigrant families who are detained at the border. And we’ll expose how border enforcement is now being used by people on the left and the Democrats to trash the president and all the while, again misleading you the American people, of course, ahead of the midterms. (Hannity, 2018, p. 1)

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<sup>2</sup> Factiva is an international news database that is owned and maintained by Dow Jones.

<sup>3</sup> Note: I coded for explicit uses of the word “pawn,” but I also coded uses with the same sentiment (how children were being used, how the family separation policy was being used, etc.).

*Fox*, as has been especially common in the Trump era (Benkler et al., 2018), begins by positioning themselves as outside of “the media,” transforming themselves into the arbiters of truth while the “fake news” overblows yet another issue. The “so-called policy” aligns Hannity, and *Fox* by extension, as on board with Trump’s assessment that family separation is not his *policy*, but rather a *law* which he unfortunately inherited. Describing immigrant families as “illegal,” rather than the more humanizing “undocumented,” Hannity positions them as rightless and deserving of punishment. And finally, Hannity arrives at the accountability portion of the utterance: “border enforcement is now being used by people on the left and the Democrats to trash the president . . . ahead of the midterms” (Hannity, 2018, p. 1). Here, Democrats are accused of using this unsavory situation to gain political favor before the midterms. Sharing space with the also-popular claim that Democrats were using this situation to push more liberal immigration policies by painting themselves as the “good guys,”<sup>4</sup> *Fox* does often display straightforward distaste for the way Democrats were using these children for their own political gain.

However, Democrats were not the only ones to blame in the *Fox News* universe. Immigrants themselves also held blame for using Latinx children for their own personal benefit:

Today, only Mexicans who cross the border illegally can be turned back, that’s absurd. Our border patrol doesn’t exist as a wave in facilitator for any group of supposed family members who mouth the script given to them by lawyers, non-governmental institutions or other people in their home countries, that they mouth for asylum. The American people are footing a really big bill for what is tantamount to a slow rolling invasion of the United States. And we can no longer permit Central American countries to export their poverty and their desperation to our nation. Our own children, Black, white, Asian, and Latino, need help too. (Ingraham, 2018, p. 3)

The “supposed” family members are mentioned here as a nod to another of *Fox*’s claims: many of these children were separated from their “families” because these were not their true families at all. Here, Ingraham (2018) alludes to the belief that under previous administrations, claiming asylum was an easier process for family units—so immigrants began taking advantage of that to get as many people across the border as possible, sending children on the journey with unfamiliar (or criminal) adults. Through the assertion that immigrants are “mouthing the script” (Ingraham, 2018, p. 3) to qualify for asylum, Ingraham takes the stance that immigrants are often, if not usually, falsely claiming asylum. This assumption elides any sort of humanization or empathy for asylum seekers and again places immigrants in a space of rightlessness.

In closing out the quote, Ingraham uses many rhetorically recognizable terms—recognizable because they are terms that Trump used as well. Her comparison of immigrants to an “invasion” echoes Trump’s rhetoric and repeated usage of the metaphor, and it is the very same rhetoric that many saw reflected in the August 2019 El Paso mass shooter’s manifesto, talking of a “Hispanic invasion” he aimed to

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Ingraham (2018) mused, “Having lost the argument and frankly, the last election, Liberals have seized on the separated children and turned the entire image into a political weapon, attempting to emotionally manipulate the public perception of immigration enforcement” (p. 2).



repel (Mackey, 2019). Also in reflection of Trump's rhetoric, Ingraham claims Central America is shipping their children to the United States to get away from their own problems—"their poverty and their desperation" (Ingraham, 2018, p. 3)—at the expense of our own "Black, white, Asian, and Latino" (Ingraham, 2018, p. 3) American children. Here and elsewhere, *Fox* dismisses immigrant needs via a performative "wokeness" that posits an "America First" nationalistic rhetoric, rendering immigrants' needs secondary at best and detrimental to American lives at worst. This rhetoric is ideologically striking, partially because "wokeness," a popular term meaning to be socially aware (Whiteout, 2018), is generally associated with the political left and its origins in the Black activist community. As we will see, *CNN* and *MSNBC* also perform wokeness, but *Fox's* use is notably different: Instead of promoting social justice, this performative wokeness is appropriated to pit the marginalized American child against the marginalized immigrant child while maintaining a guise of social responsibility and racial equity.

Apart from claiming that immigrants at large are to blame for the family separation policy—that if they would just stop lying about their needs and "invading" our country, this would all end—there is one more strategy deployed by *Fox* to blame immigrants themselves for the conditions in which these detained children are living: patronization. Brit Hume, *Fox News* senior political analyst, in claimed her June 20, 2018, story,

There are two kinds of immigrant children who were separated from their families. One kind, and this is the largest group, are unaccompanied immigrant minors who arrive on our borders and cross our borders . . . and their parents are nowhere to be seen. (MacCallum & Hume, 2018, p. 4)

Placing blame squarely on the shoulders of undocumented minors' parents has been a popular news media frame time and time again (Heidbrink, 2020; Patler & Gonzales, 2015), and it functions to return innocence to these children while also vilifying their parents. Even when this construction is meant to be sympathetic toward immigrant children, it is still problematic in an environment that is hostile to immigrants (Patler & Gonzales, 2015), as we see in Hume's discourse.

These kids, she said, made a "harrowing journey" from Mexico or Central America, and they "display unbelievable courage and wherewithal to do it and come to this country" (MacCallum & Hume, 2018, p. 4). As a result, she explained, they must be housed somewhere "until their hearing" (MacCallum & Hume, 2018, p. 4). This construction of the immigrant child's experience—that they are extremely courageous even while their parents are "nowhere to be seen" (MacCallum & Hume, 2018, p. 4)—clearly posits that these parents are incompetent, cowardly, or both. The question left unsaid is this: Who would allow their own child to make this "harrowing journey" alone? The answer, then, is that we, the ever benevolent United States, will take care of these brave children because their own parents would not. We did not separate these children from their parents—their parents made that choice for them. We are exceptionally caring, providing refuge to children that are not even our own.

This rhetoric of care and American exceptionalism characterizes *Fox's* "tightrope walk" mentioned earlier. Essentially, in trying to both support the president's questionable moral position while maintaining some level of exceptional American moral authority, *Fox* broadcasted stories that boiled down to this: We

know this child detention looks bad, but there is a necessary reason for it, and if there were not, the United States would never do something so horrible. In fact, it is the Democrats and immigrants who are at fault and are perpetuating this condition—we are simply upholding the law and pushing for an end to the law via democratic processes with which Democrats will not cooperate.

### **CNN**

*CNN*, as a more liberal channel, heavily focused on blaming Trump specifically, secondary to Republicans as a whole, for using these children for political gain. Perhaps the least nuanced station, *CNN* maintained an identifiable line throughout most of their reporting: Trump made this decision, he can easily fix it, and the only reason he will not is because he believes tough immigration policies will rally support in his base. They occasionally invited on Republicans who voiced their distaste for family separation and child detention, thereby framing the blame more squarely on Trump than on his party as a whole. In the end, *CNN*'s conclusion reads that we as a country are better than this, and the decisions of one immoral man must be stopped to help us return to our roots as a welcoming nation of immigrants.

Abby Phillip, *CNN* White House Correspondent, displayed *CNN*'s position in her June 20, 2018, reporting:

The president continues to blame the Democrats [for family separation], and he also is trying to get funding for his border wall, and changes to the legal immigration system. There is a little bit of a dispute within the White House right now about whether this fight is worth it, whether it is useful leverage to them in order to get other legislative priorities, and there's also one other thing. The president is looking to November when there are midterms ahead. They are trying to find ways to rally the Republican base. And the president believes that this is a key issue for his supporters, and something that really gins them up. This more than other things like tax cuts might work effectively to get them out to the polls. (Stout & Phillip, 2018, p. 3)

"The president" is mentioned again and again in Phillip's reporting here, and he is framed as the main source of the issue. She noted that Trump is blaming the Democrats—a fact echoed in *Fox*'s coverage as well as in the president's own speech—but she also stated that this controversial approach to immigration is being weighed to decide whether it is "useful leverage . . . in order to get other legislative priorities" (Stout & Phillip, 2018, p. 3). With concerns about the midterm elections rising, Phillip noted that Trump believed his hardline separation policy would "gin up" his base "more than other things like tax cuts" (Stout & Phillip, 2018, p. 3). In leveling the lives and bodies of immigrants with "other things like tax cuts" (Stout & Phillip, 2018, p. 3) *CNN* is suggesting that Trump is playing with the lives of these immigrants and their children just to "rally the Republican base" (Stout & Phillip, 2018, p. 3). Although there is empirical evidence to suggest that child detention did not actually receive near the same amount of public support as his other immigration policies, such as building a wall between the United States and Mexico, this framing was prominent throughout *CNN*'s coverage (Wallace & Zepeda-Millán, 2020). This stance is confirmed when *CNN* explains why Trump, later that very same day, chose to reverse his policy: "He heard from Republicans. He heard from allies. It was simply not sustainable to hold fast to the policy of family separation" (Blitzer, Bash,

Hatch, & Zeleny, 2018, p. 3). Because he had received negative feedback from those who were meant to be “[ginned] up” (Stout & Phillip, 2018, p. 3) by this policy, Trump ultimately decided to reverse the practice—that is to say, the president was only using these children for political gain all along.

*CNN* was careful to remain relatively moderate in its reporting, which led to a wider-cast net when claiming that this policy is not who “we” are—“we” including both well-meaning Republicans and Democrats. When invited on the show, Republican Senator Orrin Hatch claimed, “I’m going to try to see that it doesn’t continue. We should never play with the lives of these children” (Blitzer et al., 2018, p. 7). Although there were plenty of moral-emotional Republican reflections shown in *CNN*’s reporting, there were also many reports that explicitly paired the moral with the political. Dana Bash, *CNN* chief political correspondent, explained her conversations with Republican congresspeople:

I have talked to Republican after Republican who are—they’re saying, “This is absolutely horrible for us what is happening on the border.” Not just in terms of the images, but the fact that it is the inept ability, or inability, I should say, of the government, of the Trump administration, to deal with this. (Blitzer et al., 2018, p. 10)

There seems to be an acknowledgment here of both the human and political costs of using children this way, and it paints Republicans as a whole in a more positive light compared with Trump.

Of course, there was not a complete absence of reporting that placed blame on Republicans at large—“Republicans are terrified that this is a controversy that will last and could cost them the House,” reported Abby Phillip (Harlow & Phillip, 2018, p. 7)—but the main thrust was put on the president, painting his party as somewhat apart:

Startling pictures of immigrant children separated from their parents along the U.S.-Mexico border. Some are being kept in what looks like cages. Their cries are breaking a lot of people’s hearts, and many are demanding action. But Republicans who met with the president on Tuesday described him as more concerned with optics than actual policy. They say he bragged about his popularity, didn’t answer questions, and left them unsure what legislation he would support. (Church & Phillip, 2018, p. 1)

In often making this important distinction between the president and Republicans as a whole, *CNN* maintained a more moderate stance, which ultimately mapped onto a colorblind explanation of why this policy is “not who we are.”

In *CNN*’s reporting, the United States was often constructed as a melting pot, so the abhorrent treatment of immigrants is positioned as inherently un-American: a nation of immigrants cannot treat immigrants so horribly. In a classic move toward colorblindness, the notion of the melting pot, in which all people residing in the United States meld together to create one whole, conjures a historically inaccurate narrative that ignores the many contexts in which immigrants have been excluded, ignored, and criminalized. However, this is an image that persists in the United States’s imagined community. In a clear example of this rhetoric, *CNN* political commentator Bakari Sellers muses that we are a nation of laws, “but

we're also a nation of immigrants. And I think that this administration fails to realize that and forgets it conveniently often" (Cooper & Sellers, 2018, p. 11).

In a more powerful example that displays the unfolding of the narrative of U.S. exceptionalism embedded in *CNN's* coverage, strategist Mac Zilber says: "It's really disheartening to see, because these are people who are fleeing some of the most terrible and dangerous conditions in the world, seeking asylum, asking for [help from] the nation that is supposed to be a beacon to the world, that—almost all of us are descendants of immigrants" (Vause & Zilber, 2018, p. 3). Not only is the "melting pot" ideology evident in this quote—"almost all of us are descendants of immigrants" (Vause & Zilber, 2018, p. 3)—but also the "city upon a hill" rhetoric that paints the United States as a space glowing with truth and justice shines through. This is an uncritical view of the material and historical situation of immigrants in this country and instead a regression to the much weaker argument that our treatment of immigrants cannot continue because this is "not who we are"—"we" being all of us sans those working within the Trump administration.

### **MSNBC**

The final station covered here, *MSNBC*, has a similar angle to *CNN*, but with a more progressive bent: blame is focused on Trump but extends to Republicans more often than it had on *CNN*, and mention of the further-reaching implications of this policy is mapped out. *MSNBC*, known for its progressive tilt, accomplishes a progressive ideology through its antiracist framing of the family separation crisis. However, it falls short of a radically progressive agenda because it does not position this crisis historically: by signing onto the "we are better than this" narrative, *MSNBC* fails to historically contextualize the family separation crisis. This context would reveal that this type of extreme anti-immigrant practice actually is who we are, historically, and in fact the United States has done much to destabilize many of the countries from which these immigrants flee.

*MSNBC*, unlike most of the reporting on *CNN* and *Fox*, does position this family separation policy within larger frameworks of oppression and hate. Democratic Senator Tim Kaine, a guest on *All in with Chris Hayes* (Hayes & Kaine, 2018), said the following:

Instead of looking for bipartisanship, [Trump] has doubled down on cruel, harsh [family separation] policies, ending DACA, ending the temporary protected status for refugees, threatening to end family unification, threatening to end the diversity visa program, talking about shithole countries. This from a President who still is obsessed that President Obama isn't a U.S. citizen. (Hayes & Kaine, 2018, p. 3)

He goes on to explain that these consequences reach even farther as the nation internalizes Trump's rhetoric:

The reality about President Trump is it's not the illegal. He will try to punish immigrants, lawful or unlawful, and we're seeing in the nation a precipitous decline on foreign tourists willing to come here, foreign students willing to come study here. That's who this man is. (Hayes & Kaine, 2018, p. 3)

A delineation of the far-reaching dangers of normalization of Trump's rhetoric is a theme that materializes often in *MSNBC's* coverage.

*MSNBC* contributor Maria Kumar explains the material problems of the national internalization of the Trump administration's decisions and speech, reporting the following on May 23, 2018:

When you hear the President talk about these—basically try to categorize a whole people as animals . . . as “less than” without people being guilty, when you are increasingly living under a government that likes to racially profile people simply by how they look, that obviously gives agency to anybody to actually start racially profiling folks. In fact . . . when you actually provide some sort of protection for undocumented immigrants that don't have to have a dotted line between law enforcement and ICE, they can come out and basically talk about MS-13. They can actually report crime. But this [immigration policy] is the complete opposite. And what he is trying to do is not only a slippery slope, it's dangerous. Because all of a sudden you put literally a target on anybody that looks brown, that does not look, or maybe speaks with an accent that does not like what your typical American would look like. (Melber & Kumar, 2018, p. 13)

Here, Kumar is unafraid to name the racism and xenophobia that the Trump administration harnessed by enacting these immigration policies. She speaks to the fact that immigrants could help solve some of the problems with violence in immigrant communities, noting that they could “report crimes” (Melber & Kumar, 2018, p. 13) and report MS-13 activity if they were given safer paths to do so, but Trump is undermining these possibilities by tapping into racist beliefs and encouraging others to do the same. This rhetoric “put[s] a target on anybody that looks brown . . . or maybe speaks with an accent that does not [look] like what your typical American would look like” (Melber & Kumar, 2018, p. 13). This xenophobia, according to Rachel Maddow, is worn like a badge of honor for Republicans:

Anybody who complains about this [family separation] policy or expresses outrage or hurt about the policy is exposing themselves as a wuss and what the American people will vote for at the ballot box is harshness toward immigrants and they want it to be seen as unconscionably harsh. The more unconscionable, the better, because the more outrage and protest they stir up, the more strongly anti-immigrant they will be seen. And they think that is the best political issue they've got bar none. (Maddow, 2018, p. 4)

Democratic Representative Luis Gutierrez agrees, saying,

What's happening on the border [with family separation] is one of those manifestations, so that [Republicans] can say to their base voters, look what we are doing, look how we're keeping them down, vote for us, we're standing up. So, it's to use the xenophobia, the bigotry and the hatred and the fear of immigrants in order to stoke your voter base. That's wrong. And that's what they're doing. (Sharpton & Gutierrez, 2018, p. 6)

These are clear examples of an outright denouncement of Trump's and Republicans' vitriol toward immigrants, and it manifests much more obviously than in the moderately leaning *CNN* coverage.

However, simply naming this racism is not enough to tell the whole story of this family separation policy. By pointing the finger at Republicans and Trump, saying that they are using these children to get voters to the booth and that they are using family separation to ratchet up national hatred of immigrants, *MSNBC* does not accomplish its progressive agenda by following it through to its necessary ends. To be radically progressive, *MSNBC* would have to point out that the United States has done this in the past, that the United States has helped cause many of the problems in the countries from which these immigrants are fleeing, and that we have rarely welcomed (non-White) immigrants with open arms. These truths are largely absent from *MSNBC*'s coverage, allowing them to perform wokeness through antiracist rhetoric, saying, "This is not who we are, so we will call out your oppressive behavior," while evading the whole truth of the U.S. condition.

"[Trump] seems to be—I think that he is speaking to a nasty, cruel nativist group of people that, frankly, I don't think of as Americans," mused Danielle Pletka, guest on *Meet the Press* (Todd & Pletka, 2018, p. 4). "I consider America one of the most welcoming places in the world," she said (Todd & Pletka, 2018, p. 3). This was met with no pushback. *MSNBC* guest Tania Chavez of La Union de Pueblo Entero, an immigrant rights group, stated, "America is a welcoming country. We are nation [sic] of immigrants, and therefore we should be welcoming them" (Hayes & Chavez, 2018, p. 12). This, too, was met with agreeance. This age-old fable of the "nation of immigrants" allows Chavez to place "America as welcoming" next to "We are a nation of immigrants" without apparent friction. However, as is well documented in American history, these statements do not sit comfortably together. Though *MSNBC* does often pushback on colorblind rhetoric, they do not do so in several critical moments of family separation coverage. Thus, the end messaging of *MSNBC*'s reporting is that the right, at large, should be condemned for derailing "who we are" as Americans. We are not racist; we are not xenophobic; we do not separate children from families. This practice is new; this is unprecedented; this reveals who the "bad guys" are. Chris Hayes puts a fine point on this by saying:

For what appears to be the first time ever, this country is now systematically taking children from their parents at the border thanks to new directives issued by the Trump administration . . . Immigrants and civil rights groups are saying they have never seen anything like this. (Hayes, 2018, p. 5)

He might as well be saying, "This is not who we are, and we have never acted this horribly before." However, the reality is that the United States has long been taking children from their families, and we have been doing so in the service of asserting state and cultural dominance since our colonial beginnings. As Briggs (2020) points out, "slavery, Indian boarding schools, Japanese internment, mass incarceration, and anti-communist wars against civilian populations in Latin America" (p. 2) were/are all state-sanctioned strategies of dominance via the taking, detaining, reeducating, and control of children.

### **Conclusion: Imagining the Nation Through Race, Immigration, and Childhood**

Though fault and reasoning are spread across a variety of ideologically-constructed fields, *Fox News*, *CNN*, and *MSNBC* land in the same place on their coverage of family separation at the U.S.-Mexico border in the summer of 2018: This family separation policy is not who we are as a nation. This conclusion is arrived at in three vastly different ways, but that is what makes it so exceptional. With logics that are heavily bifurcated, how can we account for this rhetorical agreeance? In answer, I theorize that the imagined U.S. nation could *only* be ideologically maintained on both the domestic and global stages through this uniform, colorblind response in news reporting.

As earlier established, the “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006) of America is at least partially built on American exceptionalism. Even within the political polarity across *Fox*, *CNN*, and *MSNBC*, we see the same message: We are better than this. We are exceptional. America is not racist. America believes in families. America does not lock up children. American exceptionalism, as a moralizing claim, thus mandates that we uphold the ideals of childhood as precious, innocent, and tranquil to maintain this exceptional facade. Above all others, children are to be treated as innocent vessels of potential. America cannot both publicly separate brown children from their families *and* uphold moralizations concerning the sanctity of childhood and a melting pot of equal opportunity. So, in the face of “children in cages” in 2018, the United States, as a global image and as a domestic idea, had a problem.

A series of self-corrections took place to address this fissure. As has long been clear but is reiterated through obvious blunders such as Trump’s family separation policy, we live in a white nation-state. However, we also live in the era of colorblindness—so when moments of racial panic rise to the surface, especially on the global stage, we must self-correct. In the case of the family separation policy, the emotional uproar was caused by the visages of brown children separated from their families: not only were these children, who are supposed to be innocent and untouchable, but they are children of color, which created a twofold problem for the imagined exceptional community. To make this racist issue fit into the rhetoric of the imagined American community, each news station positioned this problem as one which was “not who we are.” By doing so, they were able to hold onto the “city upon a hill” ideals while still reporting the facts of a blatantly racist undertaking. As Americans ritually consumed the news, gaining a communal understanding of the situation, they were reassured: We are not racist. We believe in families. We love children. This is not who we are. Some un-American faction is to blame for this tragedy—a faction that varied greatly depending on the viewer’s station of choice.

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