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Let's be clear about what family separation means

By William Bruzzo

In my family, whenever it's someone's special day, like a birthday, we greet the morning with a plate that is red and adorned with the phrase "You are special today." And so it was on Father's Day, I ate pancakes with raspberries, talked with my wife and watched my children play in the living room and dance to music on Pandora.

Unfortunately, my experience this last Sunday was distinct from fathers and mothers who recently arrived to the border of the United States fleeing civil war, natural disaster, gang violence or looking for the opportunities of a better life. For immigrants, like my father, the United States represented hope, the chance of greater opportunity, a land of ideals where one was evaluated not by the wealth of their parents but by their own individual worth.

Now, in the era of Trump, arriving at the border with your children in tow means something else altogether: If you're seeking asylum or if you enter the U.S. illegally, and you have your children with you, they will be removed from you and sent to a federal facility while you are processed. No reunification date is given.

As stated by the Attorney General Jeff Sessions on May 7: "If you cross this border unlawfully, then we will prosecute you. It's that simple. If you smuggle illegal aliens across our border, then we will prosecute you. 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."

There is no law requiring that children be separated from their parents.

To date, roughly 2,000 children have been separated from their parents. Colleen Kraft, a pediatrician and president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, recently visited a facility housing immigrant children separated at the border from their parents. She told the Washington Post that in a room holding toddlers she saw a girl no older than two screaming and pounding her fists on a mat. As much as the worker at the facility wanted to console the child, she was not allowed to touch her. Those are the rules. Kraft commented on the situation: "The real devastating thing was that we all knew what was going with this child, we all knew what the problem was." "She didn't have her mother, and none of us can fix that."

The Trump administration has held firm, despite prominent Republicans like former-First Lady Laura Bush stating: "but this zero tolerance policy



New York Times News Service

A rally to protest immigration enforcement policies that separate children from their parents in Huntington, N.Y., June 14, 2018.

is cruel. It is immoral. And it breaks my heart." Even Hugh Hewitt, a prominent conservative radio personality and Trump administration supporter, sparred with Jeff Sessions on his radio show over the lack of humanity in the decision of his department to separate children from their parents. Hewitt tweeted to the president: "Family separation is not the result of law but the DOJ's choice concerning how to charge and how to detain. It is possible to both detain families pending adjudication and keep them together. Please direct the AG to make it so. It won't interfere with border security and it will in fact increase support for @realDonaldTrump proposals re border security."

Trump seems to be using the separation of families as a bargaining chip to force the Democrats to accept his border proposals as revealed in his tweet of June 16: "Democrats can fix their forced family breakup at the Border by working with Republicans on new legislation, for a change! This is why we need more Republicans elected in November. Democrats are good at only three things, High Taxes, High Crime and Obstruction. Sad!"

The president, a firm believer in the maxim that a lie repeated enough becomes the truth, has blamed the Democrats for the separation of families even though his own attorney general has taken full and proud ownership of this new policy.

Both Trump and Sessions see the separation of children from their parents as leverage in either keeping people from crossing the border with their families, or to force the Democrats to accept Trump's proposals. And let us not beat around the bush, what the Trump administration is doing is deterring illegal immigration by torturing children. You don't need to be a child psychologist to know that by taking a child from his parent, you are going to be traumatizing the child, probably for a lifetime. Anyone who has children — or was a child — which includes Trump and Sessions,

knows this. And these are some of the traits that make Trump and Sessions so special: They know they are torturing children but deem it necessary in order to cause adults (their parents or Democrats in Congress) to do their bidding. As a lawyer, a parent, a veteran and a proud American, I am unaware of a previous time in our nation's history when the torture of children was used to exact a political goal.

In fact, up to now the well-being of children has always been at least nominally, at the forefront of American jurisprudence in cases concerning children: In family law, "the best interests of the children" dictate custody and other arrangements even over the desires of the parents. In dependency law, a parent may lose his parental rights, if it is deemed in the best interest of the child to terminate those rights.

However, in the case of the Trump administration's new immigration policy, not only are the best interests of the children not of concern, but the administration is actually intentionally making children miserable in order to exact certain behaviors from their parents. This practice would be akin to separating Barron Trump from his parents to encourage his father to pay his taxes.

Many Americans voted for Trump because they thought he would "shake things up." I wonder if they realized it would include the deliberate maltreatment of children for political gain. Republicans, who control the Congress, the White House and the Supreme Court, are going to be confronted with having to decide whether or not to take action to protect endangered children from the acts of an administration punishing them for the acts of their parents. Let's hope they have the courage to do the right thing.

William Bruzzo is criminal defense lawyer in Orange County practicing civilian and military criminal law. He is a 1994 Graduate of the Naval Justice School and spent seven years in the United States Marine Corps which included positions as a judge advocate, company commander and the executive officer of an H&S Company in the 4th Tank Battalion. He was honorably discharged as a major. He is also a mentor at the Veteran's Court in the Orange County Superior Court.



WILLIAM BRUZZO