

Trump, Republicans exploit murder of Molly Tibbetts to stoke anti-immigrant racism

By Meenakshi Jagadeesan
24 August 2018

On Wednesday, President Trump released two video tweets responding to the news that the body of Mollie Tibbetts had been found and that a suspect had been arrested for her apparent murder. He first cited the death the night before, at a campaign-style rally in West Virginia, where he used the tragedy to vilify his political opponents.

Tibbetts, a 20-year-old college student from Iowa, had been missing for 34 days, and her case has been widely reported in the media. What motivated the Trump administration response to the story is the fact that the man arrested for the crime, 24-year-old Cristhian Bahena Rivera, is allegedly an undocumented immigrant.

Trump's official response took the form of a video of him speaking directly to the camera and using the murder of Mollie Tibbetts to justify every aspect of his foul anti-immigrant agenda: "Mollie Tibbetts, an incredible young woman is now permanently separated from her family. A person came in from Mexico, illegally, and killed her ... This is one instance of many. We have tremendous crime trying to come through the borders. We have the worst laws anywhere in the world."

Shamelessly turning what was supposedly an expression of condolence into a midterm election pitch for Republicans, he added: "We need the wall. We need our immigration laws changed. We need our border laws changed. We need Republicans to do it because the Democrats aren't going to do it ... And the wall is being built. We've started it. But we also need the funding for this year's building of the wall. So, to the family of Mollie Tibbetts [sic], all I can say is: God bless you. God bless you."

The White House official response was even more grotesque. The video released simultaneously with

Trump's statement is headlined "Permanently Separated," with the text merely stating, "The Tibbetts [sic] family has been permanently separated. They are not alone." It features unidentified men and women speaking directly to the camera, and describing, at times in excruciating detail, how their children were killed by people "not supposed to be here." The video concludes with each hammering home the point that "their separation" is "permanent."

This is an appalling and crude allusion to the widely condemned policy of family separations that has been instituted by the Trump administration in its intensified war on immigrants, in which parents and children have been separated and held in different facilities as a means of tormenting immigrants and putting pressure on them to abandon asylum claims and accept immediate deportation. As early as June, Trump had started testing the language of "permanent separation," as a way to justify the unjustifiable.

As the furor against the cruel policy of separating migrant children from their parents grew, Trump invited the parents of those allegedly killed by undocumented immigrants to the White House and paraded them in front of the press. At that event, he declared: "We're gathered today to hear directly from the American victims of illegal immigration. You know you hear the other side, you never hear this side. You don't know what is going on. These are the American citizens permanently separated from their loved ones. The word permanently being the word that you have to think about. Permanently. They are not separated for a day or two days. Permanently separated."

These parents undoubtedly deserve sympathy, although Trump has never extended it to the victims of police killings, or to the tens of thousands killed by the opioid epidemic fueled by the profit drive of the

pharmaceutical companies. Instead, he and his political and media allies extrapolate from isolated and relatively rare incidents to create the “big lie” of America under siege from immigrant criminals.

The tactic of connecting crime to immigration is not new to Trump or his supporters. Trump launched his campaign appealing to anti-immigrant racism, describing immigrants as rapists and killers, and trotting out “Angel Families”—the families of victims allegedly killed by undocumented immigrants—as the face of America under attack. Soon after taking over the Presidency, Trump established the Victims of Immigrant Crime Engagement office (VOICE), set up a hotline to report crimes by undocumented immigrants, and even made an effort to issue a weekly report documenting all crimes by undocumented immigrants against Americans.

In the two years since, Trump and his administration have consistently hammered home that point, justifying the horrifying array of anti-immigrant policies, from the militarization of the border, to the build-up of ICE, to the tearing apart of migrant families, as essential to protect the American people from criminal elements including MS-13 gang members, human traffickers and unnamed crime syndicates.

In making this case, the Trump administration has certainly not allowed facts to get in the way of the story. There is no evidence to back up the claim that immigrants are disproportionately violent or criminal. On the contrary, studies by the Pew Research Center and the American Immigration Council reveal that first generation immigrants are far less likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans.

While the data does not differentiate between documented and undocumented immigrants, it seems reasonable to assume that the working class men and women who brave immense odds, fleeing violence and crime, to cross the border and try and make a better life in the United States, would be less likely to commit crimes and more inclined to find work and strive to create a safe environment for their families.

Various members of the Tibbetts family have responded with anger at the way in which their loss is being exploited by the Trump administration. Billie Jo Calderwood, Molly’s aunt, tweeted in response to the President’s comments: “Please do not compound the atrocity of what happened to her by adding racism and

hate to the equation ... Do not turn #molliesmovement into something ugly.”

Conservative commentator Candace Owens followed Trump’s lead with an ugly tweet that reiterated the obscene parallels between the policy of family separation and isolated criminal incidents: “Leftists boycotted, screamed, and cried when illegal immigrants were temporarily separated from from [sic] their parents. What will they do for Mollie Tibbetts?”

Sam Lucas, a cousin of Tibbetts, responded with a tweet that has been widely shared: “I am a member of Molly’s family. We are not so ... small-minded that we generalize a whole population based on some bad-individuals. Now, stop being a ... snake and using my cousin’s death as political propaganda.”

The death of Molly Tibbetts is a terrible tragedy. At this point, it is not quite clear what motivated the crime. While most news reports highlighted the allegation that the accused, Rivera, was an undocumented immigrant, his lawyer has filed a document asserting that he was working in Iowa legally.

Further complicating the story is the fact that Rivera had worked for four years at Yarrabee Farms, owned by the Lang Family. One of the main owners is Craig Lang, a Republican, who in June narrowly lost a primary bid for state agriculture secretary. Lang had released a statement on Tuesday, stating that Rivera had “worked at our farms for four years, was vetted through the government’s E-Verify system, and was an employee in good standing.” Though the statement about E-verification was later withdrawn by Yarrabee officials, the facts of the case are far from clear.

What is obvious, however, is that Trump and his administration, under increasing pressure from the internecine and reactionary political strife currently flaring up in Washington, will continue using this tragedy to ratchet their ugly anti-immigrant rhetoric in the coming days.

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