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False rumors about Springfield, Ohio immigrants eating pets old fears, new media driven



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It is a tale as old as time: Dividing and conquering by using foreigners and outsiders to scare those fearful of change.

It happened during the first century when the Emperor Nero blamed Christians for Rome catching fire, rather the abysmal conditions under which most Romans lived.

It happened at the turn of the 20th century when American nativists viewed Chinese, Irish, Italian and eastern European immigrants, and even Catholics, as unwashed hordes who would sully the nation's culture.

Even Abraham Lincoln, who hated slavery but rejected the idea of social equality, tried to convince Black leaders that emancipated slaves would be better off restarting their lives in Liberia, Africa. But the group made it clear to Lincoln that people who helped to build the only country they've ever known were not about to leave it.

That thread of fearmongering has made its way to Springfield, Ohio, in the form of insidious and unfounded online rumors that "undocumented" Haitian immigrants there are eating people's pets, as well as ducks and geese in the public parks.

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Springfield police, local media and city officials investigated and found no evidence, but it hardly matters. The false report has already pinged around the world, pushed by people who have a political interest in it being believed.

It is illustrative of how much trust in public institutions has been deliberately eroded. People who normally demand that we "Back the Blue" now suddenly don't believe the Springfield police because their findings don't jibe with the narrative.

A photo accompanying the story is a perfect example of how such misinformation is being weaponized. The image of a man carrying a dead goose was taken in Columbus, not Springfield, and offers no context, no explanation of why he has the animal.

Online posts about Springfield also have been conflated with an actual incident that occurred in Canton, in which a woman with potential mental illness was arrested after being accused of killing and eating a cat.

Canton, not Springfield: Canton woman accused of killing, eating cat after 'stomping its head'

None of this matters to people who still believe pets are being eaten in Springfield.

The spark was lit after a Haitian immigrant driving on a foreign license struck a school bus in June, killing a boy. That child's family has pleaded with the public to stop using their tragedy as an excuse to demonize others.

The reason the pet-eating posts are being believed is because they tap into the primordial; namely the belief that non-white immigrants and other people of color are savages not fit to live in American society.

It has not helped that the influx of 20,000 Haitians into Springfield, a city of 58,000, has placed a strain on its housing, traffic and public services. The federal government is to blame for not being more strategic in placing them.

But the arrivals, many of whom are working at Honda, Dole and other plants, are filling jobs that were unoccupied and have boosted Springfield's economy. Haitians

began arriving in Springfield legally in 2019-2020, but only now has their presence gained the attention of some people who just happen to be running for office in 2024.

Fear of the other is deeply rooted in our popular culture. Ask any Native American who's had to endure the Hollywood stereotype of "murderous savages." Ask any Black person over a certain age about the embarrassment felt over "Tarzan" movies, in which dozens of hapless Africans were portrayed as no match for one beardless Englishman.

In 2015, we saw for ourselves what happened after Donald Trump announced his candidacy by declaring that many Mexican immigrants are criminals and rapists, though some, he conceded, are probably good people.

That should have been the end of his campaign but Trump instinctively understands the American underbelly where fear and loathing lives. The political cowardice exhibited by Republicans who knew better created a moral vacuum that millions of Trump supporters were only too happy to occupy.

Trump's current running mate, Sen. JD Vance; U.S. Senate candidate Bernie Moreno, himself an immigrant; and Sen. Ted Cruz and Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene — who live in Texas and Georgia, respectively — all have latched onto the Springfield story on behalf of Trump's campaign with no real regard for the damage being done to Springfield.

The irony is that some of the same people who have swallowed the Springfield story have no compunction in cosplaying and celebrating Vikings, whose savagery is not only documented, it's a selling point.

Doubly ironic has been the absence of outrage and argle-bargle over a neo-Nazi online homeschool in Ohio, and at the spectacle of neo-Nazis and white supremacists marching through the streets of Ohio cities, including Columbus.

They probably are making their way to Springfield, even as we speak.

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