



Former U.S. President Donald Trump, the Republican presidential candidate, gestures during the debate with Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic presidential candidate, at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia Sept. 10. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)



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The political rhetoric of the election season presents itself as a kind of photographic negative of that "social and political order whose soul is social charity," for which Pope Francis called in his encyclical [Fratelli tutti](#). Elections depend on drawing distinctions, to be sure, and negative campaigning is as old as the Republic. Still, this year we are witnessing ethical lapses that are not just wrong, but dangerous.

"In Springfield, they're eating the dogs," former president Donald Trump [said during his debate](#) with Vice President Kamala Harris. "The people that came in. They're eating the cats. They're eating — they're eating the pets of the people that live there. And this is what's happening in our country. And it's a shame."

Nothing about the story is true. The Haitian immigrants living in Springfield, Ohio, are legally in the U.S. They are not eating pets. This is not "what's happening in our country." The woman who posted the original Facebook post that went viral [has admitted she was mistaken](#). The mayor of Springfield and the governor of Ohio have [both stated the story is ridiculous](#).

The specificity of Trump's lie makes it worse. It is terrible enough when Trump peddles unspecific, racist slurs against migrants, as he did earlier in the debate and has done since he first [announced his candidacy back in 2015](#).

The immorality of Trump's lie about Springfield is more weighty because it is not generic. Because of bomb threats, apparently generated by foreign bots, [real students have been unable to attend school](#). The governor has had to direct state police resources to the city to help keep the peace, not only to protect the schools but to monitor hate groups [such as the Proud Boys](#) who have descended upon the town. Specific harms have followed from this specific lie, not just a despicable validation of racist attitudes which may or may not end in specific acts.

The good people of Springfield are not public figures. Defaming them is worse than defaming fellow politicians. We expect politicians to hurl mud at one another. During the debate, Trump said of Harris: "She's a Marxist. Everybody knows she's a Marxist." Don't you wish ABC's David Muir had asked Trump how he knew? Did he ever discuss dialectic materialism with her? Still, we expect politicians to tell lies

about each other. They knew what they were getting into when they signed up for this profession. The people of Springfield were just going about their business.

Trump's effort to muddy the waters may be ridiculous, but that doesn't mean it won't work.

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There is a corollary to this in tort law. In defamation cases, it matters whether the person defamed is a public figure or not. In both [New York Times v. Sullivan](#) and [Hustler Magazine v. Falwell](#), the Supreme Court held that libel actions brought by a public person face a stiffer burden than similar actions brought by persons who have not chosen to enter into the public sphere. In short, if you are going to get into politics, you should expect to be punched. The people of Springfield, Ohio, should not be expected to endure the punches.

There is another instance of Trump's rhetoric proving dangerous that should worry us because it may prove effective. It is his habit (and Fox News' habit) of repeating Democratic attack lines, but turning them around and hurling them at the Democrats. This week, for example, he responded to the charge that he is a threat to democracy by [leveling the same charge against the Democrats](#).

We all may have disagreements with Harris and the Democrats. If elected, Harris will do a bunch of things faithful Catholics won't like. I concur with everything [former Democratic operative Evan Barker wrote](#) about the sources of her acute dissatisfaction with the party: "Every time the elites [at the Democratic National Convention] chanted 'We're not going back,' what I heard was, 'We're not going back to the party your union family members used to vote for.' " Nonetheless, there is nothing in Harris' record to suggest she is a threat to the constitutional order. Nothing.

Trump's hurling the same charge at the Democrats is intended to muddy the waters and, just so, dilute the strength of the charge that he is a threat to democracy. There is a remedy: Don't just say it. Spell it out. Donald Trump is a threat to democracy because he not only incited a mob to violence on Jan. 6, 2021, he connived in schemes to send fake electors to Washington. He spread lies about election workers that were patently false and were designed only to raise unfounded

doubts about the election result. All this was intended — and could only be intended — to rob the American people of their right to select their president. If he has done it before, and come up short, you can bet he will go further next time to make sure his assault on democracy succeeds. That is why we say he is a threat to democracy. Each and every time, spell it out.

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Could Trump do the same for Harris? Can he point to anything she has done that is comparable to the fake elector scheme?

Trump's effort to muddy the waters may be ridiculous, but that doesn't mean it won't work. The outrageousness of his comments about Springfield, Ohio, did not prevent a refocusing of his supporters' attention on the issue of migration. Trump is an idiot but he is no fool. And that is what makes him so dangerous.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)