

April 9, 2018

RE: Washington Post Fact Checker article

Dear Mr. Leetaru:

This is Sal Rizzo at the Washington Post Fact Checker. I'm writing in response to your April 9 column on RealClearPolitics, "[Introducing RealClearPolitics' Fact Check Review.](#)"

You argue that one of our fact-checks about President Trump "would seem to reinforce concerns about subjectivity." ("[Fact-checking Trump's weekly address on immigrants, crime and sanctuary cities.](#)" March 15)

The Fact Checker welcomes debate about our methodology, findings and conclusions. But your summary of our fact-check plainly misrepresented what we wrote. Respectfully, I would like to set the record straight.

You wrote:

We also record whether the fact checker specifically noted that the verdict was based on a lack of evidence rather than on the existence of evidence that bolstered, or disproved, the assertion. In addition, we record cases in which the fact checker flags a statement, even while acknowledging that it is technically true. For example, the Washington Post assigned four "Pinocchios" to a series of claims by Trump regarding "sanctuary cities" on that grounds that the president "neglects to provide crucial context."

This example arose from the president's March 10 radio address, in which he made numerous statements about Democratic officials, most of them in California, who have erected barriers to local law enforcement cooperating with federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. The Post focused on two statements by the president, including this one: "Last week, the mayor of Oakland warned criminal aliens of a coming ICE enforcement action -- giving them time to scatter and hide from authorities. The mayor's conduct directly threatened the safety of federal immigration officers and the law-abiding Americans in her community."

The Post acknowledged that the mayor had issued such a warning. So why the four Pinocchios, a category the paper defines as "whoppers"? The fact checker asserted that Trump had omitted mitigating information, such as the detail that crime fell 1 percent in Oakland in 2017 over the previous year. But if the point of a fact check is to confirm or refute the factual details of a claim, assigning a claim of four Pinocchios while affirming it to be factually correct would seem to reinforce concerns about subjectivity.

I would respond with these three points:

1. We did not focus on two statements; we focused on five.
2. Your analysis omits any mention of the more significant inaccuracy in Trump's claim about Oakland, CA.

As we wrote, "Trump, Sessions and ICE Director Thomas Homan all suggested that 800 or so undocumented immigrants had eluded authorities because of

Schaaf's warning." This is what we were fact-checking. The distinction is key.

You suggest that we fact-checked the simpler claim that the mayor of Oakland had warned residents about this ICE raid and that we gave Four Pinocchios because Trump said this accurately but did not provide city crime statistics as context. That is not a fair characterization of what we wrote.

Instead, our fact-check focused on whether it was accurate to suggest that 800 people were able to avoid immigration authorities *because* of the mayor's warning, and whether these individuals were a danger to the community, as Trump claimed. We quoted a former ICE spokesman saying Trump's statement was false "because we never pick up 100 percent of our targets. And to say they're a type of dangerous criminal is also misleading."

3. Our Four Pinocchio rating was cumulative for all five statements. We were not "assigning a claim of four Pinocchios while affirming it to be factually correct," as you write, and we were not focused solely on Trump's statement about Oakland.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Sal Rizzo

Reporter, The Fact Checker

The Washington Post