

Commentary: Time magazine's major mistake on the crying-girl cover



There are examples of children separated from parents who immigrated illegally playing out nationwide. And well-meaning people across the political spectrum have taken a stand and forced change.

Unfortunately, they made their most iconic image something that wasn't a family being separated — and ultimately undermines their cause.

The photo of a nearly 2-year-old Honduran girl crying as her mother is being patted down quickly went viral. It also has been used for a Facebook fundraiser to raise more than \$18 million to help reunite families that have been separated. And the whole thing culminated in its placement in a photo illustration on the cover of Time magazine. The image on the July 2 issue features the girl against a red background, with President Donald Trump towering over her and the words, "Welcome to America."

The implication was clear: This was a girl who, like 2,300 other children, was being separated from her mother. Time and many others made a decision to suggest that this was an example of Trump uprooting our American ideals.

But that's not what it was. As The Washington Post's Samantha Schmidt and Kristine Phillips report, the girl's father says the child and her mother were never separated. U.S. Customs and Border Patrol confirmed it, as did the Honduran deputy foreign minister.

The image is a sad one, but it is of a rather standard occurrence at the border: A mother and her daughter attempted to immigrate illegally and were apprehended. The mother, in fact, had tried this before and was deported in 2013. The photo says virtually nothing about Trump's now-aborted policy. In fact, it's an example of how not all young children were separated from their parents.

There had never been a clear indication that the mother and her child were

separated. In speaking to The Washington Post, the Getty Images photographer, John Moore, speculated that separation might have occurred but didn't say it had. "I don't know what the truth is," Moore said. "I fear they were split up." Others, such as Univision's Jorge Ramos, assumed the policy would lead to their separation.

Time made the biggest assumption, though. You could perhaps argue that the photo illustration wasn't meant to be taken literally, but anybody who saw the cover against the backdrop of the week's news would assume this girl — pictured alone — had been separated from her mother.

And Time pretty clearly thought that was the case. A correction on the piece currently says:

"Correction: The original version of this story misstated what happened to the girl in the photo after she taken from the scene. The girl was not carried away screaming by U.S. Border Patrol agents; her mother picked her up and the two were taken away together."

That's a pretty bad mistake.

Opponents of Trump's policy will decry all of this fact-checking of the photo as hand-wringing. They'll point to Trump's and Sarah Huckabee Sanders' tweets and say all of this is a meaningless distraction from an awful policy. The tragic scenes still exist — probably some of which look a lot like one in that viral photo — and we still have very little idea how or when these thousands of children are going to be reunited with their parents after Trump's executive order reversing the policy.

But forcing action on this policy requires care and credibility. It requires convincing skeptics that you're not overselling the problem by using misleading information and images.

The use of this photo damaged that entire effort — no matter how pristine the motives were.

The Washington Post

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