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Blocking the entry of refugees makes us less American

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When the floodwalls and levees collapsed and New Orleans was filling up with water; when the looting became rampant and order seemed nonexistent, some people who hadn't left ahead of Hurricane Katrina decided that their best bet was to make the laborious trek across the Crescent City Connection toward Algiers and Jefferson Parish.

But the Gretna Police Department blockaded the bridge, thereby forcing people who were fleeing the water and chaos to turn around and re-enter it.

It was also during that week that people from New Orleans began noisily objecting to their being described as "refugees." How could they be refugees in their own country? This is the question they asked. No, these now homeless and displaced New Orleanians proclaimed, they were "evacuees."

Katrina's aftermath was not the time for such a fight over semantics. And so the only honorable thing to do then was let people call themselves what they wanted.

But now that more than 11 years has passed, we ought to be able to acknowledge that the word "refugee" was spot-on accurate for many people leaving New Orleans, especially those who were turned back as they attempted to walk the bridge across the Mississippi River. The New Orleanians who had been objecting to the word "refugees" were associating the word with people who are sometimes pitied and taken in but sometimes reviled and turned away. That's why the word was especially right for the pedestrians on the bridge. They were seeking refuge, but they encountered heavily armed law enforcement officers who denied it to them.

And the people denying them refuge were their neighbors! Or, more accurately, they were the people who lived right next door. Despite the commonality of nationality, language, religion and culture; despite a shared vulnerability to catastrophic flooding, despite the desperation that must have been on the faces of people crossing the bridge, Gretna police hardened their hearts and said no.

If Americans will turn away Americans when they're most in need of help; if Gretna will turn away New Orleans and then pat itself on the back for its egregious act of inhospitality, then it should come as no surprise that there are Americans celebrating President Donald Trump's executive order denying entry to the United States for people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen - even if they're refugees.

Some people can't acknowledge the humanity of people trying to cross from one part of the metro area into another. Surely they aren't equipped to acknowledge the humanity of people crossing oceans and continents to reach America.

But Trump's executive order is wrong for the same reason that the Gretna police's blockade was wrong: It reveals a callous indifference to people whose lives and well being may depend on their escaping their country. It transforms the United States of America from the "land of the free, home of the brave" into an anti-Muslim home of the scared.

William C. Banks, director of the Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism at Syracuse University College of Law told Politifact.com, "Since 9/11, no one has been killed in this country in a terrorist attack by anyone who emigrated from any of the seven countries."

According to a September 2016 report from the Cato Institute, "Of the 3,252,493 refugees admitted from 1975 to the end of 2015, 20 were terrorists, which amounted to 0.00062 percent of the total. In other words, one terrorist entered as a refugee for every 162,625 refugees who were not terrorists." There were three fatal attacks by refugees, Cato reports, "before the Refugee Act of 1980 created the modern rigorous refugee-screening procedures currently in place." All three murderous refugees were Cuban.

After Cato's report was published a Somalian refugee injured 13 people at Ohio State University, but he didn't kill anybody.

The recent fatal terrorist attacks on our soil - San Bernardino, Orlando, Jacksonville - were masterminded and carried out by people born in the United States or its territory. Some of those attackers' parents were born in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This is not an argument for a longer list. It's a rejection of the idea that everybody from certain Muslim countries should be turned away. It's a rebuke of Trump's remarks to the Christian Broadcasting Network that he wants preference shown to Christian refugees.

Rescuing Christians from danger while leaving Muslims to suffer is not a Christian position. Consider the position of World Relief, the National Association of Evangelicals' humanitarian arm. Its president Scott Arbeiter told CNN that he objects to Trump's prioritization of Christians. "Some of the most vulnerable people in the world right now are Muslims," Arbeiter said. "If we say no Muslim should be let in, we are denying the humanity and dignity of people made in the image of God."

The reaction to Gretna's blockade of the bridge proved that some of the most shameful, most morally bankrupt executive decisions will still be celebrated as righteous. Ditto, Trump's executive order. Some people are applauding that which should make them ashamed.