Americans support refugees — why not the Trump administration?

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The recent House Judiciary Committee hearing on the current state of the U.S. refugee program confirms what many analysts have noted – that the Trump administration is out of step with America's history as the global leader in the resettlement of the world's most vulnerable people.

For decades, the United States admitted more refugees each year than all other countries combined. Today, that's no longer true. Under the Trump administration, the numerical ceiling for refugee admissions into the country has plummeted: 45,000 in 2018; 30,000 in 2019; 18,000 in 2020, the lowest number in a single year since Congress created the resettlement program in 1980. Some officials in the administration have even suggested setting a cap at zero.

It would be easy to interpret these plunging numbers as a reflection of a new national mood. But that would be wrong. What was noteworthy about the congressional hearing was less its findings than the obvious bipartisan disagreement with the White House's current policy.

Take Colorado Republican Rep. Ken Buck. "I am in favor of admitting more refugees to the United States," he said, reflecting the general spirit of the afternoon. "I think refugees follow the rules, and we should reward those who follow the rules." He noted, "There are many Republicans who feel very strongly [about welcoming refugees]." He further promised "to work with the administration in finding ways to admit more refugees."

Buck isn't alone. His promise comes on the heels of a bipartisan statement issued last fall by U.S. senators who also insisted that "America has a responsibility to promote compassion and democracy around the world through assistance to vulnerable and displaced people." The Republican and Democratic senators decried those officials in the administration who "proposed eliminating refugee resettlements."

Why is there bipartisan support for refugees in Congress? Because it mirrors the general will of the nation. An overwhelming majority of Americans – 73 percent according to recent Pew Research – say it's important to take in people escaping war and violence.

The change in U.S. refugee policy, then, is not representative of the country and its values. The policy shift derives instead from an activist fringe of American domestic politics, a small group of hard right ideologues who tell tales of refugee-terrorists and refugee-freeloaders. The White

House's deference to these radical voices might be understandable if refugees were indeed a security threat or if they were actually an economic burden.

But as the congressional testimony made clear, the data doesn't back up their stories. According to a detailed study by the Cato Institute, the chance of an American being murdered by a refugee-terrorist is 1 in 4 billion per year. Common sense alone supports the study. Who, after all, are the most persecuted people on the planet right now? Christians, in some places "at near genocide levels."

Consider, as just one example, the sexual violence being perpetrated against Christian girls in Nigeria. Some are being kidnapped; others, brutally raped. Many who survive these harrowing ordeals are later ostracized by their families and husbands, who refuse to take them back. These girls have nowhere safe to go.

Recall, too, the Christian children who outlived ISIS. According to writer Ann Voskamp, who visited refugees in Northern Iraq, 9-year-old girls were sold in slave bazaars. They were categorized and then: "Stripped. And shipped naked. Examined and distributed. Sold and passed around like meat. Livestock." Nobody with any sense believes that these girls would want to come to the United States to commit terrorism. Yet the terrorism argument continues to be used to defend our current policy.

The economic arguments against these girls and their families aren't any more persuasive. Anti-refugee publications tout a study claiming that resettlement costs American taxpayers about $1.8 billion a year. Omitted in their propaganda are the financial paybacks that refugees bring to the country. They pay far more in taxes than they receive in benefits. They are more likely to be entrepreneurs than other immigrants. And their median household income after 25 years is an incredible $14,000 more than the median income of U.S. households overall.

As Sens. James Lankford (R-Okla.) and Chris Coons (D-Del.), along with a number of other Republican and Democratic senators, pointed out last fall, "In 2015 alone, more than 180,000 refugee-owned enterprises generated $4.6 billion in business income, more than the United States' annual budget for refugee resettlement." Based on the economic data, there are many things that one might say about refugees — but being freeloaders isn't one of them.

So if neither the economic arguments nor the national security arguments can account for President Trump's policy shift on refugees, how are we to explain it?

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The explanation is as depressing as it is instructive about our national politics. While most Americans would welcome refugees into the country, it is not a *voting issue* for them in presidential elections. Across the country, however, there is a loud, activist fringe for whom it is, often for racial reasons. They are more passionate about keeping refugees out than the majority are about letting them in. President Trump's campaign coordinators know it is easy to pick up these radical voters – and only at the cost of a few disapproving hearings in Congress or the occasional critical op-ed in a newspaper.

To be sure, it is cynical political maneuvering by the president's advisors. But we should also have the courage to confess that until the rest of us begin to make the plight of refugees a serious election concern, then we aren't all that much better in this area. Keep in mind, then, that our

inactivity is allowing a radical fringe to run our refugee policy. And remember, too, those 9-year-old Christian girls — stripped, shipped and passed around like meat.