



ND Congress members at odds on Trump travel ban

April Baumgarten

January 29, 2017

North Dakota's lone Democrat in Congress said President Donald Trump's ban on travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries "puts America's safety at risk," but a Republican Congressman said claims like that "sound like hysteria."

Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, D-N.D., wrote Sunday in a lengthy Facebook page post that Trump's ban and "requirement of a religious test" hurts the U.S. in its war against ISIS by isolating Muslims living in the country who "help root out potential terrorists."

"It also confirms the lie terrorists tell their recruits: that America is waging a war on Islam," she wrote. "This is outrageous."

Rep. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., rebutted those claims in a phone interview with Forum News Service, pointing out the ban is a temporary measure to likely form future policy on refugees. He also said comparing "little old ladies from England or Sweden" to "young Muslim men from Syria" as posing the same threat is "not compassion, it's just foolishness."

Saying the U.S. shouldn't do something because it might "irritate" its enemies or make them mad is "a smokescreen," Cramer said.

"To suggest somehow that this somehow emboldens or incites our enemies is to put our enemies in control of American policy, and that's just not true," Cramer said. "I think what Donald Trump is doing is he's pulling America's head out of the sand and facing the reality that we have not been kept very safe by current immigration and refugee policies."

Sen. John Hoeven, R-N.D., said in a statement that a review of the nation's refugee policy is appropriate.

"We face a very real threat from terrorism, at home and abroad, and I believe a review of the refugee resettlement program is reasonable so that we ensure there is a strong vetting process in place to make sure America is safe," Hoeven said.

"In fact," Hoeven added, "President Obama issued a six-month ban on Iraqi refugees in 2011. We need to do it in a way that follows the law and treats all people with respect."

Trump, a Republican, signed an executive order Friday that places a 90-day freeze on visitors from Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, Iran, Syria, Iraq and Libya. Refugee entry into the U.S. has been halted for 120 days, and the entry of Syrian refugees has been stopped indefinitely.

His orders, which included giving priority to Christian refugees, drew sharp criticism, with some claiming it established a religious test for entering the U.S. and is effectively a “Muslim ban.”

A federal judge ruled those from the countries named in the ban who had visas and had already arrived in the U.S. could not be removed.

Heitkamp cited in her post a Cato Institute study stating no Americans died from 1975 to 2015 in terrorist attacks on U.S. soil due to attacks perpetrated by foreign nationals from the countries listed in Trump’s ban. Saudi Arabia, home to 15 of the 19 terrorists said to be involved in the 9/11 attacks, was not listed as a country of concern in Trump’s orders. Mohamed Atta, the apparent tactical leader of the attacks, was from Egypt, while the other three came from the United Emirates and Lebanon -- those countries are also absent from Trump’s orders.

Cramer noted some think he should expand the list, but he called Trump’s move to start with the seven countries that have been declared by Congress and White House officials as what Cramer called “the most dangerous areas for harboring terrorists” a common-sense approach.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer pointed to President Barack Obama's actions in his second term to limit travelers from the countries named in Trump's ban as a basis for the Republican's orders. The Obama Administration previously called those named in the travel ban "countries of concern," according to media reports.

“Doing more vetting of more people traveling back and forth from these terrorist hotspots and the United States, while it might be inconvenient to the people doing the traveling, it’s certainly not as inconvenient as the terrorist attacks not just taking place in the United States but across the world,” Cramer said. “To me, it’s hysteria that’s exaggerated. ... It’s mostly political.”

Cramer called the religious aspect of anti-ban activists’ arguments “a distraction,” stating the U.S. policy on accepting refugees has been based on helping minority religions facing persecution.

“You’d have to be completely naive, at best, to not understand or not know that in places like Syria ... that Christians are the most persecuted people in those countries, and they are the minorities,” he said. “Suddenly, it’s not OK to unidentified persecuted Christians as a persecuted group.”

Heitkamp wrote the U.S. must continue to keep its doors open to those “seeking opportunity and refuge,” just as it has for generations. She added immigrants play critical roles in supporting local economies, including in North Dakota, where refugees have been relocated in the past. She also called on the U.S. to focus on “true vulnerabilities,” such as homegrown terrorism and “non-citizens who could seize on anti-refugee and anti-immigrant policies as opportunities rather than obstacles.”

“We must never take for granted the opportunities we have by closing those doors to others seeking the same hope for a better future,” she wrote. “We must be America.”