

# The Columbus Dispatch

## Fears over Syrian refugees are overstated, some say

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November 29, 2015

WASHINGTON — New York billionaire Donald Trump warns that Syrian refugees “could be one of the great Trojan horses.”

Writing for Fox News, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee denounced President Barack Obama’s “outright dangerous” plan to accept 10,000 Syrian refugees in the United States.

And even Ohio Gov. John Kasich, who has assiduously cultivated an image of moderation in a Republican presidential field of conservatives, said this month at the National Press Club in Washington that “we understand” those fleeing Syria “are in trouble, but think about putting somebody on our street or in our town or in our country doing us harm.”

Yet, as millions of Syrians escape the unspeakable carnage of a civil war that has claimed more than 200,000 lives since 2011, a growing number of experts suggest the rhetorical fears of many GOP presidential candidates are wildly exaggerated.

“These threats could change in the future,” acknowledged Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy expert at the libertarian-leaning CATO Institute in Washington. “But the refugee vetting process is very good. They err on the side of rejecting people.”

The current debate, in which each Republican candidate seems determined to show they will resolutely prevent Islamic State militants from slipping in among refugees trying to reach the safety of America, mirrors a recurring theme in American politics.

From the Japanese in the 1920s to Jewish refugees in the 1930s, and South Vietnamese in 1975, each wave tends to find a welcome in America ranging from indifference to outright hostility.

“In America, we always think of ourselves as a nation of immigrants, which we are,” said Tom Jawetz, vice president of immigration policy for the Democratic-leaning Center for American Progress, a nonprofit organization in Washington.

“But it’s almost always taken us a long time to warm up to each new immigrant flow,” Jawetz said. “The country has always had an initial reaction that has been based largely on fear and xenophobia that in time has looked wrong and shortsighted.”

A new Quinnipiac University poll of 600 Iowa Republicans likely to vote in that state’s caucuses in February shows 81 percent oppose accepting Syrian refugees.

In the aftermath of the Islamic militant attacks in Paris that killed at least 130 people, the Republican-controlled U.S. House brushed aside an Obama veto threat and voted, 289-137, to temporarily halt the refugee program while insisting that FBI Director James Comey declare each refugee will not pose a threat to the United States.

The Senate has not yet acted on the bill, but House Republicans who backed the measure included Pat Tiberi of Genoa Township, Jim Jordan of Urbana, and Steve Stivers of Upper Arlington.

Defending the vote in an opinion piece for CNN, House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., contended that “most refugees pose absolutely no threat to us, but we simply don’t have a sufficient process for figuring out who each person is and verifying his or her background.”

Yet, in a report released this month, Nowrasteh wrote that since the terrorist attack on Sept. 11, 2001, only three of the 859,629 refugees accepted into the United States from all over the world have been convicted of plotting terrorist attacks — all of which were to take place outside the United States and none of which succeeded.

The White House argument is resonating with Democrats. In the latest Quinnipiac poll, 81 percent of Iowa Democrats likely to vote in the Feb. 1 state caucuses support accepting Syrian refugees.

Many refugees fleeing persecution from the Nazis, Communists or Russian pogroms throughout the decades rose to the pinnacle of American business, entertainment and politics.

They include former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger from Germany after the rise of Adolf Hitler; Andrew Grove, one-time CEO of Intel, who escaped Hungary after the 1956 Soviet invasion; Carlos Gutierrez, former CEO of the Kellogg Co., who fled Fidel Castro’s Cuba; and Louis B. Mayer, founder of MGM studios, whose Jewish family left Russia in 1887.

The past efforts to impose restrictions on immigrants trying to reach the safety of the United States have usually been launched by Congress or governors.

In 1924, alarmed at the Communist seizure of power in Russia, the spread of the Communist movement into central Europe and Asia, and the controversy over the 1921 murder conviction of Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Congress overwhelmingly approved a sweeping anti-immigration bill which sharply curbed eastern European immigration and prohibited Japanese immigration.

Republican President Calvin Coolidge signed the bill, although “he felt the exclusion of Asians and the direct rejection of the Japanese was unnecessarily hostile and dangerous,” said Amity Shlaes, author of *Coolidge*, a 2013 biography of the nation’s 30th president.

“Lawmakers of the period saw a chance that the revolution happening elsewhere would happen here, too, especially if workers here could not find jobs, as had happened after World War I,” Shlaes said. “Reassuring U.S. workers was the goal here, whatever one thinks of the method.”

The same ferocious debate erupted in the spring of 1975 after North Vietnamese troops toppled the U.S.-backed regime in Saigon, prompting hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese to flee.

The Democratic-controlled U.S. House initially rejected providing \$177 million to allow them to settle in the U.S., prompting President Gerald Ford to call the vote “not worthy of a people which has lived by the philosophy symbolized in the Statue of Liberty” and which “reflects fear and misunderstanding rather than charity and compassion.”

California Gov. Jerry Brown said he did not want any Vietnamese refugees to enter his state, and relented only when Ford adviser Julia Taft threatened to “announce that the governor did not want any church, synagogue, family, former military family in California to be able to help these people.”

Eventually, roughly 131,000 South Vietnamese entered the country, including Lien-Hang Nguyen, a prominent professor of history at the University of Kentucky who at age 5 months was whisked out of South Vietnam by her family.

“Any reading of our history shows our refugee system has paid off and that locking them out has always caused more damage than good,” Nowrasteh said. “The damage to our reputation, the damage to human rights in the world, and the locking out of millions of people who could have been productive citizens because of some temporary local fear . . . has always caused more damage.”