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The Dangers of Refugee Humanitarianism

Inviting the world is not a cure for invading the world.

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The debate over President Obama's proposal to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees has provoked an emotional debate between left and right, and as usual it is more about the self-conceptions of the debaters than anything else. Hand-wringing liberals who like to see themselves as "humanitarians" are telling us that President Obama is right to invite these refugees into the U.S., where they will be resettled at taxpayer expense and many will eventually take the road to citizenship. This makes them feel good about themselves, and gives them what passes for the moral high ground in our society.

On the other side we have mostly conservative Republicans who want to be seen as "tough" guys: they want to keep the refugees out. Jeb Bush has suggested that we only accept Christians: no Muslims allowed. The question of how one verifies the religious affiliations of 10,000 Syrians, of whom we know very little, is not something Jeb seems to have thought through. Rand Paul has introduced legislation, similar to a bill put forward in 2003 by his father, that would ban entry to the U.S. from countries where terrorism is rife. And Donald Trump, pointing to the Paris attacks as justification, would simply impose a blanket ban: perhaps his proposed Deportation Posse would empty the country of Muslim immigrants as well as illegal immigrants from Mexico.

The problem with these rather draconian proposals is that they will do next to nothing to prevent terrorist attacks from occurring in the United States. Europe has millions of Muslims with full citizenship in their countries of residence: France, Belgium, Britain, Germany, Denmark, Sweden—all have substantial Muslim and Arab populations, and they too can travel to the U.S. on a tourist visa.

Indeed, if ISIS is planning on infiltrating the U.S., taking this route would be easier and faster. Unless the Donald Trumps of this world want to cut all ties with Europe, and absolutely forbid any and all travel to the United States from European countries with substantial Muslim/Arab populations, the "security" argument against admitting refugees from Syria makes little sense. So Republicans who are telling us that stopping all immigration from "terrorist" countries is going to solve the security problems created by our foreign policy of perpetual war are simply talking nonsense.

To be sure, admitting 10,000 Syrian refugees—to start—would take us down the road trod by the Europeans: while the Paris attackers were directed by a “mastermind” who entered Europe taking the same route as thousands of refugees, his collaborators were all residents of France and Belgium. While it is absurd to think that all the Syrian refugees are potential terrorists, there is certainly a good chance that *some* of them are: if you bomb and destabilize an entire country, some of the inhabitants are bound to hold a grudge. If I kill your mother and father, and leave your house in flames, and then invite you to live in my home—well, there could be repercussions. This is just plain common sense.

Trevor Thrall, of the libertarian Cato Institute, argues that we should take in far more than 10,000: “An open-door resettlement policy would save thousands of lives and improve the life prospects of millions more.”

Yes, he’s talking about *millions*. Thrall continues:

The declared goals of Western intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq have included the freedom and well-being of the people in those countries. Sadly, military campaigns by the United States and U.S.-led coalitions in such places have failed to provide any such thing. An open-door policy would finally provide concrete benefits to these people, and represent a morally superior alternative to forcing refugees to remain in dangerous camps or sending them back to deadly conflict zones.

But the declared goals of the interventionists were not only unrealizable, they were inappropriate and *wrong*: for it isn’t the function of the U.S. government to secure the “freedom and well-being” of people throughout the world. That duty is owed only to the American people. Indeed, the very idea that enforcing global goodness is Washington’s solemn duty is what led to our disastrous military adventurism to begin with—and unleashed the refugee flood. Schemes to show the world—and reassure ourselves—that we are “morally superior” have led to nothing but endless misery and bloodshed.

In any case, libertarians who argue that we shouldn’t have a welfare state at home can hardly argue that we need to establish one on an international scale. Who, after all, is going to pay for all this?

Arguing for a massive refugee rescue effort, Thrall juxtaposes this to military intervention, as if it’s one or the other: but *neither* course is libertarian—or rational—in any sense of the term. Why can’t we refrain from either invading or inviting the world?

Aside from asserting our own “morally superior” status, Thrall avers that initiating a massive refugee rescue program has some concrete benefits:

An open-door policy is likely to make Americans, and those in other Western countries, safer over the longer term by challenging the perception, so susceptible to exploitation by

extremists, that the United States and its allies care very little about the people of the Middle East.

Here in the New Rome, we direct the destiny of nations like pieces on a chessboard, even unto moving whole populations from one end of the earth to the other. From the height of our arrogance we exercise godlike power and imagine ourselves to be a virtuous people: that's where the moralizing tone of the "let them in" crowd comes from. But arguments for a "morally superior" solution to the refugee crisis coming from an administration that has itself created that crisis fall on deaf ears as far as I'm concerned. The same president who has droned thousands of innocents the world over, and who is now supporting Islamist "rebels" intent on destroying Syrian society, is now telling us we have a moral obligation to transfer the victims of his policies to American soil.

Far from showing the world that we "care," what we are demonstrating is our incurable narcissism. This whole issue has little to do with genuine concern for the hapless victims of the Syrian civil war: it's really all about *us*, and how wonderful we are, how liberal and tolerant and "free." The more perceptive of the refugees, when they arrive in America and recover from the horrors they've seen, will know it—and they won't like what they see. They'll begin to wonder how they wound up in a country of hypocrites, who can bomb a country with one hand and lift them up and out of their misery with the other. And then—watch out. Because no amount of "vetting" can eliminate the human factor and erase hatred from the hearts of men.

Indeed, when Tashfeen Malik, the wife of Syed Farook—and his accomplice in the San Bernardino massacre—applied for a "fiancée visa," she gave as her home address in Pakistan a street number that does not exist. So much for the vetting capabilities of our immigration bureaucracy.

Advocates of opening our society to 10,000 Syrian refugees often say that the chances of finding ISIS sympathizers among them are slim, and that the risk is therefore worth taking. We mustn't capitulate to "Islamophobia," they aver, and let the bigots win a victory. Yet they underestimate the danger posed by the very forces they abhor, and therefore they underestimate the risks involved.

We are one terrorist attack on American soil away from imposing draconian policies on those Muslims who are already here. I would remind our "liberals" and my libertarian friends that Franklin Delano Roosevelt interned tens of thousands of Japanese-Americans during World War II—while "liberals" applauded. No less an authority than Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, speaking to law students about the Supreme Court's decision in *Korematsu v. United States* to uphold Roosevelt's order, told them: "Well of course Korematsu was wrong. And I think we have repudiated it in a later case. But you are kidding yourself if you think the same thing will not happen again."

Recalling a Roman maxim, "In times of war, the laws fall silent," Scalia went on to say: "That's what was going on—the panic about the war and the invasion of the Pacific and whatnot. That's what happens. It was wrong, but I would not be surprised to see it happen again, in time of war. It's no justification, but it is the reality."

This is the reality our would-be “humanitarians” refuse to see.

A Paris-style attack on a soft target in this country would see Muslim Americans—U.S. citizens—subjected to the same treatment suffered by Japanese Americans in the 1940s, if not worse. The irony is that those who imagine they are standing up for the rights of a persecuted minority and opposing bigotry will have only succeeded in setting up the very people they want to protect for even worse persecution. Even if there’s only a one-in-ten or one-in-twenty chance of this happening, *the risks outweigh the benefits*.

Not only that, but such an incident would signal a wholesale assault on the constitutional protections afforded to all Americans and empower the very real and growing authoritarian tendency in American politics.

But I guess that’s a small price to pay for the opportunity to play Russian roulette with the fate of so many people in the name of some supposedly “principled” ideological stance, not to mention flattering ourselves with visions of our own virtue.

There is only one way to (eventually) get to the root of the refugee problem, and that is: Stay out of the Middle East. Stop overthrowing regimes we don’t like. Cease policing the world.

Even then, of course, the blowback from our policies will continue for many years to come: people have long memories, especially if you’ve killed their families, wiped out their villages, and destroyed what little they had. Not everyone who has been a victim of these policies will want to take revenge: but some will, and it doesn’t take an army to sow the kind of terror the Tsarnaev brothers did at the Boston marathon. To not recognize that is willful blindness.

Garet Garrett, a trenchant critic of America’s rise to empire, saw what was coming. I am haunted by this quotation from his final book, *The American Story*, published at the dawn of the Cold War, because it summarizes our predicament so well:

How, now, thou American, frustrated crusader, do you know where you are?

Is it security you want? There is no security at the top of the world.

To thine own self a liberator, to the world an alarming portent, do you know where you are going from here?