

An Asylum Issue
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Our country has a long history of granting asylum to people in need. It was not usually an issue of compassion, however; it was the pragmatic need to increase the population of this country, particularly the need for inexpensive labor. We took in the Irish, victims of the British-made famine, and they served as domestic help and heavy labor building the railroads.

But they suffered suspicion as Catholics, fearing their loyalty was to the Pope, not the country. They were not treated well by the existing population until decades later, when urbanization gave them power (political) and clout (policing). Today, everybody claims Irish origin on St. Patrick's day. Our current president is of Irish origin himself!

Every other group of European immigrants endured the same trajectory: admission, relegation to low-pay labor, religious dislike, but eventual success as Americans. Jews and Italians joined the Irish in this process.

One group of needy immigrants, the Chinese, were relegated to the most difficult labor of the railroad building process, but were largely deported or hunted down and killed after they were no longer needed. We wanted only European immigrants, not Asian, until after World War II.

Immigrants from our southern neighbors filled a need for agricultural work. We actually had a program for annual temporary labor, but too many stayed. Many Mexicans already lived in the border states, states that took the land from Mexico. They experienced the same disdainful treatment that our European immigrants faced: exploitation as cheap labor, suspicion over their religion, and belief that they were particularly crime-prone.

Although most Mexican immigrants have done well in America, many rising to professional and government levels, the continual flood of asylum seekers from the ill-governed Hispanic countries alarms those Americans who proclaim "America first," wanting them not only barred, but the "undocumented" expelled from our midst.

There is another asylum issue facing us today, one that was hidden before: women seeking asylum. Many of those fleeing Central America are running from abusive husbands and governments unwilling to protect them. A Central American seeking such asylum took her case to the courts, and Trump's Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, rejected her plea, undoing prior law that would have protected her.

Men like Sessions see granting asylum to any woman who asked for it a flood, fails to understand that it is extremely difficult for women to run, pursued by violent husbands and macho governments. Few have independent means, and few would run without their children. The few who can make it should indeed be given sanctuary. There will be no flood.

Many years ago, when I ran the United Nations Association in San Francisco, I addressed a meeting of immigration lawyers about the status of women around the world. The women lawyers invited me. The men sat there with folded arms. When I finished telling them about how women are actually treated in Latin America, they recognized the need for granting asylum for the few who could escape.

Today we have another asylum need: women in the Muslim world, particularly Afghanistan. Our 20-year presence in Afghanistan has created a far better country than we found. Half the country has modernized; women are now educated, professional, and most live as women do in the more socially advanced countries. This is being threatened by the withdrawal of American military protection and the possibility of the hated Taliban returning to power.

We have a duty to grant asylum to as many Afghan women and their families who seek it. We also owe like protection to all the men and their families who helped us: translators, assistants, journalists, and jurists. This will not be a flood. It is very difficult for people to uproot themselves from hearth and home. But those who do should be given asylum and new homes to become good future fellow Americans.

We only need look at the enormous benefits to our country that have come from Iranian asylum seekers, fleeing the Islamic Republic of Iran. Fortunately, our hostility toward Iran made this asylum pill go down easier.

Fleeing Islamic fanaticism should make such immigrants welcome.

683 words

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