

We Can't Let COVID-19 Destroy Our Nation's Bipartisan Commitment to Refugees

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With the nation focused on lockdown at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, an important American milestone was missed on March 17th: the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Refugee Act of 1980.

The anniversary of the Refugee Act went nearly unmentioned in American media amidst the rush to contain the virus, but this foundational piece of legislation has a lesson to teach us that is timelier than ever as our nation celebrates World Refugee Day on June 20.

Legislators and the American public they represent can often disagree over critical issues, and despite sharing a common enemy in COVID-19, our nation's politics seem more divisive than ever. It sometimes seems we are unable to establish a common response to mitigate and contain the virus.

The 1980 Refugee Act, on the other hand, stands out as a resounding bipartisan success. It was able to pierce through all the disagreement and divisiveness going on at the time, and it went on to become one of our nation's most successful programs—resettling over 3 million people in four decades.

This important legislation was passed unanimously in 1980, and 40 years later it still enjoys strong support from both sides of the aisle because it reflects fundamental American values that speak to the heart of all who have made this country their home. In recent years, Texas has frequently led the nation in refugee resettlement due to the state's abundant employment opportunities, favorable cost of living, family-friendly environment, and the warm welcome of our citizens and our communities.

But in recent years, this administration's unprecedented attack on resettling refugees has plunged the program into uncertainty, leaving some of the world's most vulnerable people left wondering if they will ever recover their lives.

A new refugee admissions ceiling is set every new fiscal year, and from the beginning of the current administration's tenure to now, the ceiling has dropped from 95,000 to a record low of 18,000. And combining roadblocks from this administration with the pandemic means that the country will resettle far fewer than even that.

This drop in resettlement is unprecedented in the history of the program, which hit its zenith in the Reagan Administration. The most frightening part about this drastic cut to the resettlement ceiling is that the world has never had as many refugees as we have today.

There are 70.8 million forcibly displaced people around the world, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and for many who are living out their days in a refugee camp, the United States was their last, best hope.

Times have changed, and the spread of COVID-19 has only pushed these vulnerable people deeper and deeper into obscurity. Due to the shutdown, global resettlement efforts—including here in the U.S.—have all but come to a standstill.

Without the compassionate voice of the American people, refugees around the world will lose their voice entirely.

Yet, there is hope. Legislators are taking notice, and because of the groundswell of support from everyday Americans, the voice of refugees are once again being heard.

The American people are taking stock of their own family histories of immigration and fighting for freedom. The U.S. is more diverse than ever, and we are discovering the amazing stories of our neighbors, many of whom know what it's like to be a refugee and to be given a second chance at life in a free country.

Many of our refugee neighbors are on the front lines fighting the pandemic. They wouldn't be here without the Refugee Act.

World Refugee Day on June 20th is a nationwide celebration of our shared heritage and bipartisan values, and is the perfect opportunity for the American people and their representatives to make their voices heard in support of refugees at this critical time.