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DO NOT ENTER

America has never actually welcomed the world's huddled masses

Migrants and refugees walk on a highway in Istanbul. (Ozan Kose/AFP/Getty Images)

by María Cristina García

For a growing number of politicians, this month's attacks in Paris mean it's time to stop bringing Syrian refugees to the United States. The risk that the Islamic State might send infiltrators in disguise, the theory goes, outweighs America's usual attitude toward taking in desperate people from around the world. "Our nation has always been welcoming, but we cannot let terrorists take advantage of our compassion," House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) said Tuesday. "This is a

moment where it's better to be safe than to be sorry." By the middle of this past week, more than half the country's governors had declared that their states wouldn't accept any resettled Syrians. Things had changed after Paris.

In truth, they hadn't. The outcry over resettling a relatively small number of Syrian refugees — far fewer than France vowed to take in even after the attacks — isn't an exception; it's more like the rule. Yes, the United States has been generous: Since 1948, close to 4 million refugees have come here. But despite our reputation as a haven for the oppressed, those admissions have always been controversial. There is one way the Syrian refugees are different, though: They, and others who have arrived after 9/11, are among the most carefully vetted in American history.

U.S. refugee policy dates to the end of World War II. During the 1930s and 1940s, the nation turned away thousands of Jews fleeing the Third Reich, even though our immigration quotas remained unfilled . Politicians justified their actions by arguing that German spies and subversives might be hiding among the refugees, but anti-Semitism was the more likely motivation for American neglect.

After the war, President Harry S. Truman and his allies on Capitol Hill urged Congress to authorize the admission of displaced and stateless people from Europe. Financial aid to war-torn nations was not enough, they argued; the United States had a moral obligation to accept a share of the refugees. Even as Americans became more fully aware of the horrors of the Nazi death camps, Congress resisted. It took three years to pass the 1948 Displaced Persons Act, which brought in more than 200,000 Europeans (mostly ethnic Germans) over the next two years. The law discriminated against Jewish and Catholic refugees, and Truman was tempted to veto it because it was "wholly inconsistent with the American sense of justice." Still, the law officially launched U.S. refugee policy. Together with the 1953 Refugee Relief Act, it facilitated the entry of almost 600,000 European refugees.

In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower had to convince a wary American public that it was in the national interest to accept Hungarian refugees. A Hungarian rebellion against Soviet domination had elicited a brutal crackdown that forced more than 200,000 refugees into Austria and Yugoslavia and destabilized two countries still reeling from World War II. Opponents argued that communist spies and saboteurs would arrive with the refugee flow and harm the nation. Supporters said the United States had a moral responsibility to the Hungarian rebels and to the European host nations — especially since the U.S. government had encouraged the rebellion through propaganda broadcasts on Radio Free Europe.

The Eisenhower administration enlisted the help of public relations firms to generate positive press for the refugee program and “sell” the Hungarians to the public. For the next year, Americans were subjected to a massive media blitz, with story after story on Hungarian freedom fighters, comparing them to American patriots and stressing their love of liberty and democracy. Eventually, 38,000 Hungarians were admitted, many of them screened and registered at Camp Kilmer, N.J.

Subsequent groups faced similar backlashes. The 200,000 Cubans who were paroled into the United States from 1959 to 1962 after Fidel Castro’s rise to power were predominantly white, middle-class and professionally trained, but that did little to pacify Americans, especially those living in South Florida, who bore the brunt of the refugee crisis. While the national media celebrated the refugees’ heroism and “American” values (one Newsweek story enthusiastically told readers, “They’re OK!”), letters to politicians and civic leaders revealed growing anger and frustration in Miami. Over the next five decades, South Florida residents would see many more refugees from Cuba — through the freedom flights from 1965 to 1973, the 1980 Mariel boatlift and the attempts in 1994 by more than 30,000 Cubans to flee by boat — as well as arrivals from Haiti, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Colombia. Today, Miami is home to one of the most successful Latino business communities in the nation, but the demographic shift scared away many non-Hispanic white residents, who resented the cultural transformation of “their” city.

Polls in the 1970s found opposition to the continued entry of Vietnamese refugees and other Southeast Asians fleeing the devastating war in Vietnam and its aftermath. News stories about the high casualty rates of Vietnamese boat people stranded at sea and about squalid refugee camps in Thailand did little to change public opinion: By 1979, only 32 percent of Americans surveyed wanted to accommodate more Southeast Asian refugees, and the government struggled to find people willing to sponsor them. Americans complained that the refugees were culturally “unassimilable,” politically suspect, self-interested migrants who came to mooch off the welfare system. Resentment fueled conflict in many communities across the country, from Philadelphia to Port Arthur, Tex., to Los Angeles.

Cuba and Vietnam (along with the Soviet Union) eventually became the top source countries of refugees during the Cold War. As in the Hungarian case, the White House took the lead in crafting refugee policy, so much so that Congress passed the 1980 Refugee Act to make admissions more accountable to public will. Since then, the White House, in consultation with Congress, has established an annual refugee quota, with numbers allotted to different regions of the world. These allotments reflect geopolitical and foreign policy interests, as well as humanitarian obligations.

But 9/11 completely changed our refugee policy. In the wake of the terrorist attacks, the George W. Bush administration restructured the immigration bureaucracy to convey a greater sense of safety to the public. Refugee admissions were casualties of that restructuring. The annual quota constantly goes unfilled; 2013 marked the closest we came to meeting it after 9/11, although even before then, the quota was almost never met. Refugees now face many bureaucratic hurdles: They must be investigated by national and international intelligence agencies; their fingerprints and other biometric data are checked against terrorist and criminal databases. They are screened for disease. They are interviewed and reinterviewed by consular officials. In sum, they must prove that they are worthy of refuge in the United States.

The State Department reports that refugee applicants can expect to wait on average 18 to 24 months for processing and screening, but humanitarian aid workers on the ground report a much longer wait. Just like other immigrants, refugee applicants are not guaranteed admission. There is no "waiting list" per se, and the selection process can be capricious. Even Iraqi and Afghan translators, already cleared to work with U.S. military personnel, have difficulty securing refugee status or special immigrant visas. If many in this doubly vetted population can't get visas, those without connections will encounter still greater obstacles.

This past week's political rhetoric warns that the Syrian refugee population, dominated by young men traveling alone, poses a risk. But adult males traveling solo are the least likely to be admitted to the United States unless they can demonstrate persecution. U.S. resettlement policies favor women and children, the elderly and the infirm, victims of torture, and religious minorities. Those with family here are also prioritized.

As generous as our refugee policy has been, the real burden is borne by countries that border areas of crisis. The Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, near the Syrian border, for instance, is home to 80,000 people. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees refers only 1 percent of refugees for resettlement in third countries such as the United States. The refugees our nation admits each year are but a drop in the proverbial bucket.

In September, the Obama administration announced that it would increase the annual refugee quota over the next two years to accommodate a larger number of Syrians. The quota, set at 70,000 to 80,000 for more than a decade now, will increase to 100,000 by October 2017. This will be the largest refugee quota since before 9/11. But the numbers are allotted by region, not country, and Syrians compete for visas with many other displaced people. In 2012, amid Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's violent crackdown, only 31 Syrian refugees were admitted to the United States. This year, despite the ongoing civil war and the rise of the Islamic State, just 1,682 refugees came from Syria — 2.4 percent of the total refugee admissions. The administration promises that at least 10,000 of the coming year's 85,000 refugees will be Syrian, but the numbers will probably be smaller.

Is it possible that a terrorist will arrive undetected in the small pool of admitted refugees? No system is 100 percent secure. Even tourism can pose a potential threat: The Tsarnaev brothers, responsible for the Boston Marathon bombing, arrived in the United States on tourist visas in 2002 and became legal residents when their parents were granted asylum. So it was the asylum bureaucracy, not the refugee system, that handled their case. But what immigration official can predict that children will be radicalized on American soil?

So some fears and suspicions are understandable. But we can't always protect ourselves from our homegrown assassins, either. (Who predicted Columbine, Sandy Hook, Charleston?) We live in a society unable to guarantee safety on our streets and our college campuses, in our movie theaters, churches and schools.

Sixty years ago, Eisenhower reminded the nation that the United States must accept its "full share" in assisting victims of oppression. That remains true. Denying vulnerable populations — and populations we made vulnerable — the chance to make a case for refuge goes against everything our country claims to stand for. If fear paralyzes our movements, dictates our policies and erases a proud humanitarian tradition, then those who wish us harm will celebrate indeed.

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