Opinion: Indifference to refugees is shameful

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In January 1939, Americans were polled and asked whether the government should permit bringing in 10,000 children — mostly Jewish — to the United States. Sixty-one percent said no. That spring, the SS St. Louis carrying Jewish refugees was denied entry into Cuba and then the United States. The ship eventually landed in Holland, but over 600 of the 937 passengers were ultimately killed by the Nazis.

This history reminds us of our human capacity to cause harm — not only through acts of aggression but also through acts of indifference. The response to the Syrian refugee crisis today is strikingly and sadly similar to the U.S. response toward Jewish refugees more than 70 years ago.

A majority of U.S. governors, including Gov. Bruce Rauner, are refusing to accept Syrian refugees and pressuring Congress to do the same. Reflecting earlier eras of xenophobia, their actions ignore the United States' legal obligations and the extensive vetting process that refugees already undergo before being admitted to the U.S. They likewise perpetuate stereotypes of refugees that are simply false: according to the Migration Policy Institute, of the 784,000 refugees resettled in the United States since 2001, only three have been accused of terrorism-related activities — none related to acts targeting the U.S.
There are approximately 19.5 million refugees worldwide, over half of whom are children and four million of whom are from Syria. To date, the United States has admitted only 1,854 Syrian refugees. We should be ashamed.

After WWII, world leaders recognized that international collaboration was necessary to ensure future protection for those fleeing persecution. In 1950 the United Nations established the UNHCR to assist with the resettlement of one million refugees displaced by the war. A year later, it adopted the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which set the obligations of States to offer protection. The U.S. ultimately accepted those obligations in 1968.

In 1980 Congress enacted the Refugee Act, codifying its international obligations into domestic law. It authorized the president, after engaging in consultation with Congress, to determine the annual number of refugees to be admitted, for which there are no numerical limits, and to allocate additional slots for an “unforeseen emergency refugee situation.” It also created the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which is responsible for administering programs funded by the federal government to resettle refugees throughout the U.S.

At the international level, UNHCR is required to find “durable solutions” for the refugees. These include repatriation, an increasingly unavailable option, integration (into the host country), or permanent resettlement in a third country. Approximately 28 nations, including the United States, offer resettlement. Less than one percent of the refugees under UNHCR’s mandate are referred for resettlement.

The vetting process for refugees is extensive. Resettlement Support Centers that operate throughout the world accept a case referred from UNHCR. They then collect data from the applicant, and an official from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service conducts an in-person interview with the applicant. Cases are screened by the FBI and put through databases run by the Defense Department and other federal agencies. A person is checked for any grounds of inadmissibility, including terrorism. It takes approximately 18-24 months before someone may be approved for resettlement in the U.S.
The United States is a nation not just of immigrants, but of refugees – who have escaped religious, ethnic and other persecution. In these times, we are called upon to remember our heritage, and to honor both our legal and moral obligations. The Syrian refugees do not need more suffering, fear or oppression. They need our compassion.

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