Our Betrayal of Syrian and Iraqi Refugees

By George Packer, THE NEW YORKER, November 20, 2015

This week, David Bowers, the Democratic mayor of Roanoke, Virginia, invoked the internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War as justification for keeping out Iraqi and Syrian refugees. I wonder if the mayor (who later apologized to anyone he might have offended) would have paused for one second in his headlong rush to join the anti-refugee hysteria sweeping America if he’d known that, among the residents of his city, there’s an Iraqi named Hayder. In 2003, Hayder was working as an interpreter for the 82nd Airborne Division, in Baghdad, when his convoy was ambushed by insurgents. Dragging an American sergeant out of the line of fire, Hayder was hit in both legs and nearly killed. He lost most of his right leg. Unable to work and in danger for his life, he fled Iraq with his wife and son to Jordan, where the family languished for years in deepening misery while getting nowhere in their efforts to get visas to the United States. Finally, in 2007, his case came to the attention of Kirk Johnson, an American refugee advocate, and the next year Hayder and his family were resettled in Roanoke. In 2013, he became a U.S. citizen.

Mayor Bowers hasn’t tried to have the family interned, not yet anyway, though the logic of his statement could have led him there—for keeping Muslim refugees out doesn’t solve the problem of the ones already here. (Donald Trump, tossing out answers that move beyond U.S. history to that of Nazi Germany, is talking about imposing mandatory registration on all Muslims in this country.) A bill that overwhelmingly passed the House on Thursday, by a vote of 289–137, with the support of fifty Democrats, would require the director of the F.B.I., the Secretary of Homeland Security, and the director of National Intelligence all to certify that each refugee applicant from Iraq or Syria poses no threat to the United States before being admitted. According to Betsy Fisher of the International Refugee Assistance Project, this group includes fifty-eight thousand Iraqis who have applied for resettlement through a program known as Direct Access, which was created by Congress for Iraqis who can show that they worked with the United States government or with American companies, non-profits, or media outlets. If it had the chance, the Islamic State would slaughter every one of them. The same goes for the many Yazidis applying for resettlement from Iraq—members of a religious minority who have been rounded up, enslaved, and murdered by ISIS. It’s already very, very hard for people like them to get here. Iraqis and Syrians are probably the most heavily vetted refugees in the history of the world. If three top government officials are going to be required to put their names and reputations on every admission, the very, very hard will become just about impossible. The House is counting on political cowardice and bureaucratic indifference to advance the cause of irrationality and bigotry.

We’ve seen this kind of frenzied meanness during past crises, real or perceived. It hit the country in the form of the Palmer raids after the First World War, with the internment camps during the Second World War (Franklin Roosevelt’s most shameful act), and in the McCarthyite politics of the nineteen-fifties. Such moments were made for Ted Cruz—this generation’s Joe McCarthy. Not to be outdone by the House, on Thursday he introduced a bill in the Senate called the Terrorist Refugee Infiltration Prevention Act. It would add refugees from Libya, Yemen, and
Somalia to the Syrians and Iraqis on what is effectively a black list. (There was no explanation for the absence of Afghanistan, Mali, and Nigeria as potential sources of Terrorist Refugee Infiltration.)

Cruz’s bill would allow two exceptions to the barred door. One is for individuals who have provided “substantial assistance” to the U.S.—though the bill would require certification from the leaders of four government agencies that it was “a level of assistance without which the United States could not achieve the purposes for which the assistance was provided or sought.” This tortured language raises the already-high barrier and would keep out pretty much every last Iraqi, of any faith, who lost his leg or his safety or his future while helping Americans in his country. The second exception, Cruz explained, is for “Christians, Yazidis, small minorities that are facing genocide.” This is a back-door way of legislating a religious test for refugees, by exploiting a powerful word that didn’t seem to move Cruz when it mattered. Last year, after Yazidis were rounded up, executed, and enslaved by the Islamic State, Cruz voted against a bill that gave President Barack Obama authority and funds to fight the organization.

President Obama has been admirable in refusing to give in to this stampede. He warned unnamed politicians “not to feed that dark impulse inside of us.” Obama has a lousy track record of actually admitting Iraqi and Syrian refugees, but at least he doesn’t exclude any on the basis of religion, or try to justify his poor performance by betraying liberal values.

A lot of people in this country are disgracing themselves this week. They include politicians of both parties—though many more Republicans than Democrats—and all regions. Their motives vary: deep-seated bigotry, unreasoning fear, spinelessness, opportunism, or some unholy mix of them all. During the House hearings, Republicans kept demanding guarantees of absolute security. “I haven’t heard a single one of you say there’s no risk,” Representative Trey Gowdy, Republican of South Carolina and chairman of the Judiciary Committee, told Administration witnesses. There’s no such thing as no risk. Parisians could stop going out to cafés, Germans could turn back every single Syrian at the border, Americans could stop admitting anyone as a refugee, and there would still be risks. It’s absurd, and infantilizing, to demand that our officials promise to keep us absolutely safe. We don’t live that way, nor should we. Instead, we have to find the balance between safety and a decent life in a free society during an age of terror. Like every compromise, it will leave us unsatisfied. But the alternative is unfreedom and injustice.

On Thursday night, as the House was passing its anti-refugee bill, I moderated a panel at New York University with four women who were visiting from Syria. I wish Ted Cruz, Trey Gowdy, and other panic-stricken demagogues had been in the audience. One of the Syrians, a journalist named Zaina Erhaim, screened four short films she’s made about women going about their lives in Aleppo, Syria, which is one of the least safe places in the world. Two of her subjects were on the panel—Ahed and Zein. They both work for international relief agencies in Aleppo, distributing bread and bandaging the wounded. Zein also teaches small children in a school that is literally underground. A fourth woman, Rafea, works as an activist and writer in Damascus. All four are from Sunni Muslim families, though Rafea is a self-described atheist; Ahed and Zein wore the hijab. To get to New York, Ahed had to spend several nights in the mountains outside Aleppo, since the Turkish border crossing is closed and the roads aren’t safe. Asked what she wants from Americans, Erhaim, the filmmaker, said an end to air attacks on cities, and a safe
zone for civilians along the border. All of the women said that they no longer have any hope for Syria, but all of them are going back there.

Caught between the Assad regime, the Islamic State, and an indifferent world, these women still feel and think, they scoff at the beliefs of the extremists, rage at the cruelty of Assad, cry while they stitch up children, mourn the dead, tease and comfort one another. They’ve found depths of kindness and resilience, hatred and love, that they didn’t know before the war. The Syrian horror hasn’t killed their humanity—if anything, it’s intensified. I went home, in the rain, with a sense of wonder and shame.