

18082 American anxiety about refugees and immigrants

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Passions were high and the President of the United States was eager to act. In 1798, John Adams, amid talk of war with France, signed a government act to protect the national interest against internal dissent and outside agitation. Among other things, the law increased the number of years applicants for citizenship had to wait and authorized the President to deport any foreigner he considered dangerous to the country.

Anxiety about refugees and immigrants is nearly as old as the Republic. Americans have often limited immigration in moments of fear, only to have their fears dissipate amid cooling emotions and a reinvigorated opposition.

One sad thing about President Trump's attempted immigration ban is that Presidents before him have also used excessive measures when more moderate ones would do. It is totally reasonable to worry about infiltration, but fighting infiltration is a subtle business. And Trump has been anything but subtle.

That Trump was not alone in attempting to shut America's doors to particular groups was largely lost in the backlash against his Executive Order suspending admission of all refugees as well as immigrants and visitors from seven majority-Muslim nations. Since the days of the first pilgrims, Americans prefer to think of themselves in a warm and generous light when it comes to the nation's open door.

The truth is both more complicated and less attractive. George Washington wrote that America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger but also the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions. Yet fears about indiscriminate immigration have always existed.

It is an American paradox, one that continues without stopping. An example from the Cold War – another moment of rising international tensions and domestic fears – is worth commending to Trump's attention. In 1952, the American President of the time vetoed a bill – the Congress disagreed and passed it anyway – that perpetuated the quota system that had been put in place in the 1920s. The President contested the decision and wrote to Congress: "This is fantastic. The countries of Eastern Europe have fallen under communist control. They are silenced and fenced off by barbed wire and minefields. No one passes their borders without risking his life. We do not need to be protected against immigrants from these countries. On the contrary we want to give a helping hand to save those who are brave enough to escape from barbarism."