

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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THANKSGIVING: THE ULTIMATE REPAST FOR REFUGEES

This coming Thursday, families and friends from Maine to California will gather together in observance of Thanksgiving. And though its history is steeped more in myth than in fact, Thanksgiving is, nonetheless, THE most American of all celebrations. It is also at root, a repast for refugees. According to the classic myth, the first Thanksgiving, a gathering of Plymouth colonists and Wampanoag Indians, took place



in the autumn of 1621. And although no one knows for certain whether their feast consisted of turkey, cranberries and pumpkin pie or venison, acorn squash and Yorkshire pudding, the fact remains that the pilgrims - refugees from religious and political oppression - were the guests, the Wampanoag their native hosts. One wonders what direction American history would have taken had the Wampanoag - along with the Mohegan, Penobscot, Narragansett and other Algonquin tribes - had they been told in 1621 that some of these mostly English refugees would one day be responsible for decimating their numbers, stealing their land and effectively becoming their masters? Would they, like the great, great, great grandchildren of these refugees in 2015, deny and debar entry to yet another

generation fleeing religious and political oppression for fear of what a handful might do in the future? History records that the vast, overwhelming majority of pilgrims - like their contemporary counterparts fleeing from places like Syria, Iraq, Haiti,

Argentina and Cuba - that these original refugees were coming to these shores neither to destroy, nor to decimate, but to live lives of dignity and hope; to give their children a chance to dream dreams of joy rather than be afflicted by nightmares. (The cartoon above, by the late *New Yorker* artist Donald Reilly expresses this truism in a most humorous way. The caption reads "Religious freedom is my immediate goal, but my long-range plan is to go into real estate.")

It goes without saying that America is history's greatest and most successful experiment in multiculturalism. We are all immigrants; we are all refugees. It's just that for some, their pre-American roots and shadows have long dissolved into the ether of history. For others, those roots and shadows are still visible - even audible. We all escaped previous homes, societies and cultures; we all made the long journey across the ocean - some in steerage, others in supersonic jets; we all began the process of becoming Americans. And many suffered the ignominy of being strangers in a strange land; of being labeled "the other." Despite a long history of welcoming and absorbing new people into this "land of the free and home of the brave," we have always had - running alongside it - a distaste for and fear of - those who don't look like us, sound like us, or pray like us. Time and again we have set up legal barriers making it difficult - if not downright impossible - for people from various parts of the world to make new lives; to go from being refugees to be Americans. That first view of the "Lady With the Lamp" is overpowering for those seeking freedom; for becoming Americans. [*n.b.: It is a little-known but tremendously ironic fact that when the French sculptor [Frederic Auguste Bartholdi](#) conceived of what would turn out to be the Statue of Liberty, his original plan was for his statue to be a **Muslim peasant woman** guarding the approach to the Suez Canal. The French largely paid for the statue; not the central government, but some 180 municipalities, including Paris. Private citizens also contributed, among them descendants of French soldiers who fought in our Revolutionary War. French school kids kicked in centimes. The pedestal was largely financed by Americans. Newspaper owner Joseph Pulitzer pledged to publish the names of all those who donated. They included thousands of school kids who kicked in pennies. A kindergarten class came up with \$1.35. That's Bartholdi's original sketch on the right.]*



In the 1840s we made the entry of Irish refugees escaping famine nearly impossible. In the early 20th century we made sure that the majority of those seeking entry would be western Europeans. In the late 1930s, we turned away Jewish refugees feeling certain death at the hands of the Nazis. After Pearl Harbor, we incarcerated Japanese-Americans in detention centers. And now, are we being urged to deny entry to anyone coming from Syria or Iraq . . . or at least those who aren't Christians. Republican presidential hopeful Dr. Ben Carson recently compared those fleeing Syria's years-long

civil war to “rabid” dogs. On the prospect of those refugees coming to the United States, Carson said, “... *if there’s a rabid dog running around your neighborhood, you’re probably not gonna assume something good about that dog. And you’re probably gonna put your children out of the way.*” Not to be outdone, Donald Trump declared that if elected president, he'd implement a database tracking all Muslims in the United States. Everyone would be legally obligated to register "at different places" around the country, putting their personal tracking information into the database. When asked how his idea differed from what the Nazi’s required of Jews, Trump responded, four times, “You tell me.”

Not a single Republican leader - past or present - has called out Carson or Trump for their bigotry; has decried their use of fear tactics where leadership is required. Instead, we get more and more so-called leaders ratcheting up the rhetoric of fear. Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich recently wrote that “... *every hour it [Trump's and Carson's statements] stands without rebuke is more poison leeching into the bedrock of America.*” As we get closer and closer to Thanksgiving, how shameful and ironic it is that so many have forgotten that we all came here as refugees; that this week's celebration is the ultimate repast for refugees.

In the Stone household, it has long been the custom that before eating, we go around the table, each taking as much time as required, to tell one another for what they give thanks. It is not a time when we discuss sports, movies, celebrities, current events . . . or politics. We've got the rest of the year to hash and rehash all that stuff -- and most often without changing anyone's mind or position. On Thanksgiving, we pause to show gratitude; to remind ourselves not of how many strange, small-minded people there are out and not of how many people and programs are less than ideal, but of precisely the opposite. Thanksgiving is a day and a time to recharge our human batteries with the fuel of hope; to beat back - even if for a single day - the urge toward being critical, cynical and negative.

And of course, to dine in harmony - refugees all.

From our home and dining table to your, here's wishing you a Thanksgiving that is both delicious and meaningful . . .

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