

The Social Contract

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A Note from the Editor

Time to Revise Our Refugee/Asylum Policies

The United States has long provided a safe haven for individuals genuinely subject to persecution and oppression in their native lands. In the past, because of this country's seemingly boundless resources and open space, this rarely came under close scrutiny. It was easier to extend this generosity to others when we had a relatively small population in relation to the size of our land-mass.

Refugees are persons who are supposed to have a "well-founded fear of persecution"; asylees are persons *already in the U.S.* who claim that they will be subjected to "persecution and oppression" should they be forced to return home.

According to Freedom House, 34 percent of the world's population lives under conditions that they describe as "not free" and another 23 percent live under "partly free" circumstances [*Freedom in the World 2013*, www.FreedomHouse.org]. Thus, 57 percent of the world's population of over 7 billion could conceivably be considered potential candidates for admission to the U.S. as refugees. That comes to around 4 billion people.

The hard reality of surging Third World populations, political instability, and poverty, along with the inability of other countries to permanently resettle substantial numbers of refugees—especially economic ones—dictates the need for a whole new approach to refugee problems.

The U.S. State Department defines Refugees as individuals "who are in immediate danger of loss of life and for whom there appears to be no alternative to resettlement in the United States." By this standard, relatively few of the over three million people admitted as refugees since 1975 actually qualify. "Refugee admission to a large degree is simply immigration by another name," Don Barnett points out, "where costs, normally incumbent upon the immigrant and his sponsor, have been shifted to the U.S. taxpayer."

Moving a relatively few of the world's less fortunate to this country may salve the conscience of some involved in refugee services. But it fails to address the underlying demographic, political, and economic causes that foster the desire to emigrate. We should be using all of the diplomatic and economic pressure at our disposal to improve conditions in source countries and thus reduce migration pressure. ■

Wayne Lutton, Ph.D.