

Epilogue: *Hysteria challenges a city's commitment to human rights.*

By Errol D. Jones

From Pakistan to North Africa across the horn of the Muslim world, the ravages of war have unleashed an unprecedented refugee crisis. It has shaken the United States at a vulnerable juncture between paranoia and the rule of law.

Muslims, especially, have been targeted by the politics of exclusion. In 2015 in response to President Barack Obama's plan to admit more Syrian refugees, Idaho's Butch Otter was one of 28 governors to call for a moratorium. "It makes no sense under the best of circumstances," said Otter, who denounced Syrian refugees as "people who have the avowed desire to harm our communities."

A moratorium on refugee resettlement, Otter believed, would keep Idaho safe by giving Congress time to strengthen the vetting process. Refugee advocates responded by pointing to the testimony of U.S. security experts. Homeland Security and immigration officials maintained that refugee vetting, already extreme, was more deliberately thorough and multi-layered than any other immigration process the United States had ever invented. Advocates worried that a moratorium would endanger refugees at a time when the United States, for humanitarian reasons, needed to double down on its moral leadership of the free world and increase its quotas.

In April 2016, nevertheless, Idaho Republicans passed a House bill – blocked in the Senate – to prohibit Idaho courts from acquiescing to Islamic or Sharia law. The Legislature, citing the "Muslim agenda," also rejected an international treaty for the protection of children. Idaho became the only state to reject the treaty, but the vote was reversed a few months later when it appeared that the state might have disqualified itself from a federal appropriation.

Two months later right-wing bloggers were fanning the flames. *Breitbart News*, *The Drudge Report*, and *Refugee Resettlement Watch* fictionalized a report about an assault on a child at a Twin Falls apartment complex. Police had acknowledged an incident involving a 5-year-old girl and two older boys – one from the Sudan, the other Iraqi. It was not a rape, but because all participants were juveniles, the records were sealed.



REFUGEES WELCOME IN IDAHO



Left: Thirteen stars encircle Idaho in the emblem of the Three Percenters, who want to ban refugees.

Right: Protesters face off in Boise, 2016.

Previous page: Boiseans rally at the Idaho Statehouse in support of refugee resettlement, 2015.

Bloggers immediately embellished the story with the false accusation that Syrian refugees had raped the girl at knife-point. Bloggers then published the rumor that Obama was punishing Idaho by sending the Syrian hordes.

Outspoken among the resistance were “militiamen” calling themselves the Three Percent of Idaho. In June 2015 they had rallied against refugees at the College of Southern Idaho Refugee Center. They wanted the center closed, and the militiamen also strongly supported passage of federal legislation to do two things already done: grant Homeland Security power to approve refugee admissions, and compile a list of refugees on public assistance.

In November 2015 about 100 militiamen and sympathizers rallied at the Idaho Statehouse. Brandon Curtiss, president of the militia, and spokesman Chris McIntire proclaimed their core beliefs. First was the conviction that Islam was a political organization bent on world domination; second, that the federal government had been complicit in fostering the destruction of Christian traditions. America, said the Three Percenters, had become unrecognizable; Muslims, an existential threat. “The guys just can’t believe how many Muslims there are in the country today,” said journalist Shane Bauer who went undercover to report on militias in a story for



LEFT: KATHERINE JONES/IDAHO STATEHOUSE. RIGHT: DARIN OSWALD/IDAHO STATESMAN

Mother Jones. Bauer reported waterboarding and the use of Tasers. Meals were prepared with bacon grease to expose Muslim infiltrators.

Other critics were more concerned about the perceived financial burden of the refugee resettlement program. The blog *Refugee Resettlement Watch*, based in Maryland, damned the Obama administration for financing a corrupt “industry” of resettlement programs. Unwittingly, bloggers alleged, the U.S. taxpayers were footing the bill for “a self-perpetuating global enterprise.” Relief agencies had been staffed by “hundreds of taxpayer-supported U.S. contractors [who] are largely refugees or immigrants.” Their sinister purpose was “to gain entry for more refugees, usually for their co-ethnics.”

Refugee advocates claim that refugee vetting is vigilant. They point out that no refugee in the history of the program, which began with the Refugee Act of 1980, has committed an act of terror in Idaho. In 2016, nevertheless, a federal jury convicted an Uzbekistan national for terror-related crimes. Fazliddin Kurbanov, age 33, a truck driver living in Boise, had been admitted seven years before with refugee status. He was sentenced

Left: Rally and a counter protest, Boise, 2015.

Right: Welcoming refugees at the Boise airport, 2017.



A refugee from Bhutan, resettled in Boise, milks cows at an Oregon dairy, 2009.

to 25 years for aiding Uzbek jihadists in his home country and possessing the makings of a homemade bomb.

Refugee advocates remained undeterred. Religious groups welcomed refugees; fellowshipped with them; and donated food, clothing, and household items. Restaurant patrons and many employers valued the rich diversity refugees brought to the whitest American state west of the continental divide. In Twin Falls and Boise, where the dairy industry struggles with a labor shortage, refugee workers are welcome in the production of milk, yogurt, and cheese. “If a refugee has a job, they are no longer a refugee,” said yogurt tycoon Hamdi Ulukaya, founder of Chobani LLC, whose largest plant is in Twin Falls. Immigrants and refugees comprise about a third of his factory workforce.

“We need to take time to understand one another,” says Bob Schmidt, who drives a van for the Twin Falls Refugee Center. Schmidt, age 61, has tried but failed to convince his own brother and some of his neighbors that people who shovel barns deserve some respect. “How many people do you know that would get up every day, on time, for a job where a cow might take a s--t on them?” The people Schmidt drives to work “do it again, day after day.” He’s never heard a complaint.

“We’re all children of refugees, immigrants, in some form or fashion,” said Chris Talkington, Twin Falls councilman and former mayor. Like Schmidt, he saw the storm of hatred that hurt everyone in Twin Falls. “Does our economic vitality get put up on the shooting gallery for the sake of folks who’d like to ship [refugees and immigrants] away?”

An answer came seven months later from the candidate who had swept Twin Falls County with 66 percent of the vote. On January 27, 2017, President Donald Trump issued a sweeping decree: all refugee admissions would be suspended for 120 days until new processing measures were considered. Syrians were to be banned indefinitely. Annual refugee quotas would be reduced from 110,000 to 50,000. All immigration from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, and Syria would be suspended for 90 days and, after that, allowed to enter only on a case-by-case basis.

“It was a punch in the gut,” said David Lubell of Welcoming America who denounced the executive order. Lubell, age 40, tall, bearded, and earnest, addressed an overflow crowd at the opening plenary of the 2017 Idaho Conference on Refugees held on the campus of Boise State University. The speaker condemned Trump’s decree as a “societal deviation from our core values.” Compassion had been superseded by fear.



RICK HOBSON/FICKR

Horrified but optimistic, advocates seized the teachable moment to urge Boiseans to do even more. “It takes something bad to start something good,” said Lubell. Boise had become an “amazing model” of a welcoming city. Boise institutions had rejected the politics of exclusion. Whether other Idahoans would overcome the cycle of xenophobia remained to be seen.

Statehouse rally for refugees, 2015.



ERROL D. JONES, PH.D., is professor emeritus at Boise State University. He is the winner of the city’s biennial award for excellence in civic contributions to history and the arts.