

The Refugee Trail

I have just received a very useful collection of photographs of the refugee trail in the American southwest. They make clear the desperate plight of the illegal immigrants, what happens when they fear for their lives and how simple it would be to solve this ecological “disaster.” all in one graphic display!

As I read out the photographs, they make clear that:

- 1) men, women and children plus babies-in-arms, on backs or in bellies who struggled through waterless south Texas New Mexico and Arizona scrub must have been terrified. They would have heard that patrols of both officials and private ranchers possess were trying to intercept them, put them in camps, separate their children from them, perhaps beat them up or even kill them. It probably doesn't much matter whether or not these fears are real because terrified people are likely to act on their perception. But sadly as we know from the media, their fears are justified;
- 2) people on the run obviously cannot clean up effectively after themselves or dispose of waste. Where would they do so? There are no refuse bins in the ravines and draws along the Mexican frontier. And in their rush through places of danger they would have time or inclination to tidy up. Do believers in the Old Testament stories imagine that Moses' people cleaned up the “wilderness” as they fled or hobbled along? In our time, look at the mess even the equipped, trained, motivated and wealthy mountain climbers created on Everest. The Nepalese have been as outraged by the trash on their Holy mountain as the writers of the message (attached below) are by the trash left behind by bedraggled Latinos; and
- 3) it would be so simple to preserve the pristine border lands: just receive the refugees, examine them as was done on Ellis Island for the terrible diseases they are charged with bringing in their bodies, heal them, process them to weed out criminals, as was not done for the Cuban refugees from Castro's revolution, and help them become productive citizens. Of course, one may say, such activities would be invitations for thousands — millions? — of others to follow.

Yes. I think that has to be admitted. But, four things must be considered on that point:

First, no matter how roughly they are treated or how high the walls, how frequent the arrests, how painful the separation of families, how likely the deaths of the aged and children, refugees will keep on coming. When my Polk ancestors came to America in 1680, the Atlantic was a death-trap. Disease was rampant both on the wretched little boats in which they were packed and in the swamps on which they landed; water was so polluted by sewage that they tried to avoid drinking it, often risking dying of thirst or making other diseases worse, or by substituting beer whenever they could get it; scurvy and starvation killed perhaps one in each 5 or 6. My ancestors came because they feared for their lives in the suppression of Cromwell's republic. The choice, my ancestor Robert Pollock (soon to become Polk), thought was hanging or fleeing. And you can be sure that this family and their companions left behind them a trail of refuse in the Atlantic. Fortunately, plastic did not then exist nor did baby diapers which so disturbed the people who took the photographs appended below, but Robert's associates polluted as they had to. And what little they could do was later made far worse when, in their

millions, the starving Irish fled to America. The already established Americans— many of whom were themselves not long off the immigration trails — hated them. They were dirty, diseased, criminal and idle in the eyes of those who had arrived earlier. Yet they came, and, yes, *they became us*. *All of us, even the Native Americans are immigrants*. And,

Second, the refugee/immigration issue *arises at its source*, not along its route or at its end. Just as my great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather Robert made his decision to risk the perils of the stormy north Atlantic, it was almost certain death in Restoration Britain rather than hoped for riches in Maryland that was crucial; so it is today for Latino refugees in America and African and Asian refugees in Europe that conditions at their homes had become dire enough to risk death on the road to escape death at home. King Charles II gave Robert no choice; today assorted dictators, civil wars, invasions, coups, blatant effects of corruption, etc. affect not just individuals but whole societies.

Third, there are no simple or universal solutions to this myriad of evils. We have not been very successful in even ameliorating even a few of them, but, inefficient have been our efforts, they are the only feasible way forward. Suppression, creation of barriers — Mr. Trump is just the most recent of wall builders — and even genocide. These attempts never worked. Even the most brutal of them was not just evil; it was also ineffective.

The Biblical story of Moses has two morals: one is that hopeless people ultimately acquire the ability to defend themselves and the other is that once they acquire this power, they fall upon and destroy those who stand in their way. Desperation is a weapon of mass destruction. It should be avoided as resolutely as nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. Once employed it is almost impossible to stop. It goes on for generations.

But, having said this, one must also say that by attacking the causes of its use it *can be avoided* or, at worst, the results can be at least ameliorated. We know how to implement at least some of the physical parts of programs to accomplish this, as we showed in the Marshall Plan and in various aid programs. True, they were inefficient, inadequate, often misdirected or usually benefitted only the few rather than the many. But, even at their best, they were too little and too late: we need to think on a much larger scale with a significant *transfer of wealth* from the rich nations to the poor and also to address what is the crucial heart of the problem: that is that the effects of world poverty *are not just physical deprivation but also psychic emasculation*. Either we will learn to grapple with both issues or we will ultimately fail to protect ourselves; and

Fourth, if we do not learn from our experience and develop an acceptable — both to us and to them — policy to deal with the seedbed of refugees, we face a grim and bloody future. And not just for them but also for us, our institutions, our good life and our security. It does not take much imagination to foresee the horror that will follow the drying out of the world's torrid zones — a process already well advanced — and the rise of ocean levels as water heats up and ice melts to engulf the megacities of the third world and, most crucially if less dramatically, the affirmation of a sense of hopelessness among hundreds of millions of desperate people.

Perhaps alongside of the nuclear danger or environmental destruction, the *growth of awareness of hopelessness* is our most urgent challenge because, while people can exist in *ignorant* misery, they cannot exist in *awareness of misery*. They strike out, flee, or in their millions, do both. The “invasions” of Latin American refugees into the American southwest

and the flood of African and Asian refugees into Europe that we have seen so far is merely the tip of the iceberg — or, since we no longer have many icebergs — the crest of the sand dune.

Developing and implementing such a policy of dealing with the economic, social and political causes of exodus will certainly be a huge task, at least comparable to the Marshall Plan and its action component, the OECD. Being so complex, we had better get at it. And, even if we are not altruistic or human and just care at least for our own salvation, we can accomplish it.

In short, as I started by saying, this collection of photographs is a useful dispatch: whether or not the writers or photographers wanted to do so, they issued a warning for us.

In our own interest, we had better draw the right lesson from it. And right now.

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