

Kurt Williams

Annette Mewborn

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Afghan Allies Welcome

We all remember where we were the day the terror attacks of 9/11 occurred in 2001. I was sitting, confused and scared, in seventh grade English class at Fletcher Middle School in Jacksonville Beach, Florida. I knew then that I wanted to serve in the United States Army to help defend our country from terror. What I did not know is that two decades later, after serving five tours supporting counter-terrorism missions in Afghanistan, I would watch all our efforts at nation building in that fledgling country collapse within two weeks at the hands of the Taliban. I was lucky enough to get out of the country from Bagram Airfield in June 2021. Once again, I was sitting, confused and scared, but this time I was confused and scared for our Afghan allies and their families. The world watched with despair as an endless stream of refugees inundated the gates of Kabul International Airport where the final withdrawal of American forces took place in August 2021. Sadly, there were hundreds of thousands more left behind. The United States of America has a fundamental obligation to provide the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to refugees fleeing war and persecution – particularly those fleeing the Taliban in Afghanistan – and the country must meet this obligation out of necessity to live up to the principles of our Founding Fathers, maintain America's standing in the world as a beacon of freedom, and to remind ourselves that the very heart and soul of America is built on the promise of a better future for generations yet to come.

Since the very beginning, the United States has been a nation made of immigrants and refugees. George Washington helped set the tone for the potential of American exceptionalism when he claimed, “The bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions; whom we shall welcome to a participation of all our rights and privileges, if by decency and propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment” (Washington, G., 1783). According to the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, “Since the passage of the Refugee Act in 1980...the United States has admitted more than 3.1 million refugees” (Department of State, 2022). From the Pilgrims who landed on Plymouth Rock in 1620 to the Vietnamese boat people who arrived in America over 255 years later in 1975, U.S. history is replete with stories of refugees landing on our shores. Each wave of refugees – from Europe, Asia, Africa, South and Central America – brought with them their cultures, histories, work ethic, and focus on making a better life for their families in America.

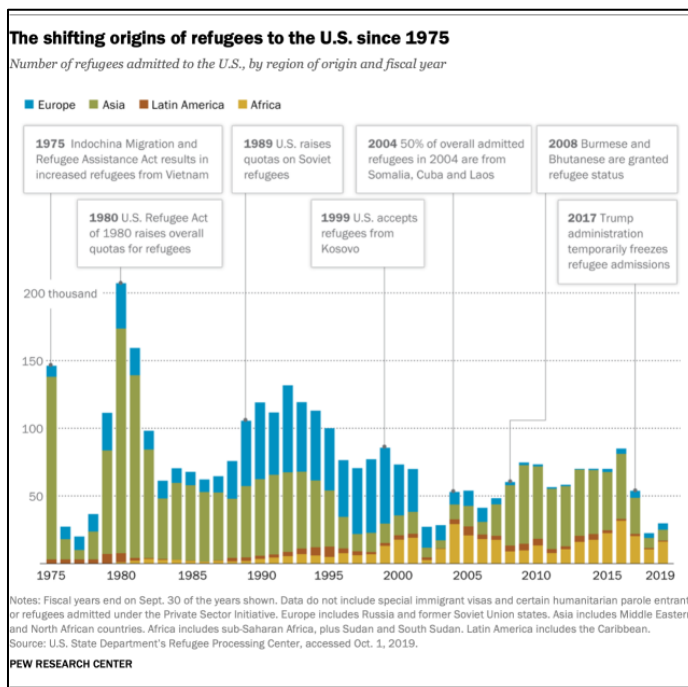


Figure 1: Krogstad, *Key Facts about Refugees to the U.S.*, 2019

One of the first sights for the new arrivals was the Statue of Liberty in New York City. Inscribed on this famous American statue are powerful words symbolizing America's stance on immigrants and refugees, taken from *The Colossus* by Emma Lazarus "...Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore" (Lazarus, E., 1883). Our Founding Fathers may have come from a different time when slavery was still legal and the settling of America came at the expense of oppressing Indigenous peoples, but even then, there was an understanding that America had potential to become a refuge for those fleeing from persecution and war across the globe. The United States should continue to honor this tradition "in Order to form a more perfect Union" just as Gouverneur Morris intended when he wrote the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution (Morris, G., 1787).

As President Ronald Reagan once observed on the position of the United States in the world, "We lead the world because, unique among nations, we draw our people – our strength – from every country and every corner of the world...If we ever closed the door to new Americans, our leadership in the world would soon be lost" (Reagan, R., 1989). The United States is a nation built with the strength and skill of immigrants and refugees. Countless foreign-born U.S. citizens such as physicist Albert Einstein (Germany), actor Natalie Portman (Israel), weightlifter-turned-movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger (Austria), and entrepreneur Elon Musk (South Africa) have enabled the U.S. to dominate and flourish in technology, culture, and economics. According to a 2019 survey from the American Immigration Council, there are 122,583 immigrants in the Virginia Beach Metro area, making up 7% of the total population (American Immigration Council, 2019). Furthermore, immigrants in the Virginia Beach Metro paid \$1.3 billion in taxes, had a spending power of \$3.4 billion, and 9,464 of these immigrants

were entrepreneurs in the area. This small portion of the population contributes immensely to the overall growth and development of our local community.

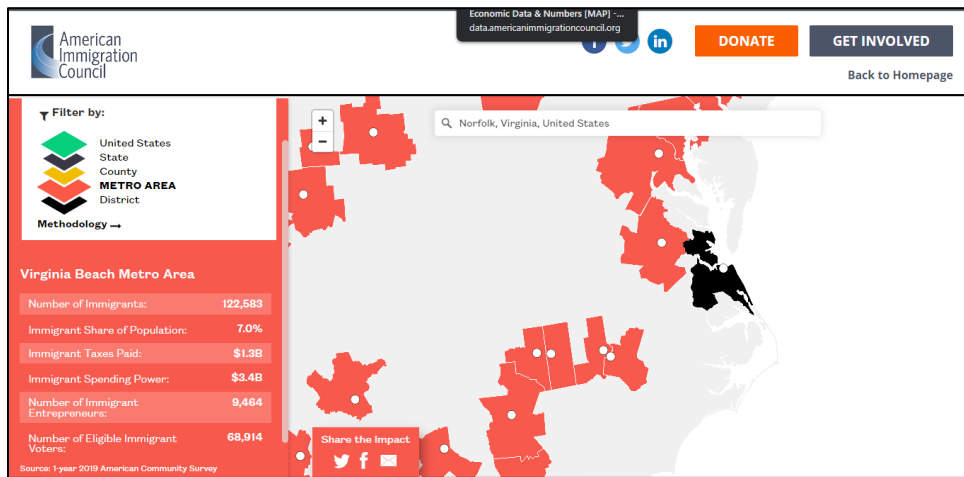


Figure 2: American Immigration Council, *Map the impact of Immigration: U.S. Economic Data*, 2019

Every four years during the Olympics immigrant athletes proudly wear the Red, White, and Blue for Team USA to prove to the world they are worthy of winning gold (Waslin, M., 2019). In addition to this, the U.S. military is the most formidable in the world thanks to citizen soldiers from different nations around the world but chose to serve America. In an address to Congress, U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond Odierno once warned “the best-equipped Army in the world can still lose a war if it doesn’t understand the people it’s fighting” (Gallus et al., 2014). Looming threats to the world order from the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation require cultural and linguistic expertise from foreign-born service members to strengthen our national security and ensure the U.S. military is ready for any contingency. In the immediate aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, retired U.S. Army major Adebayo Adeleke wrote “Our leaders must welcome our Afghan allies with open arms and then create opportunities for them – and all immigrants – to serve in our armed forces” (Adeleke, A., 2019). Afghan refugees are one vital group that can bring their unique skills and expertise to help strengthen the U.S. military, and the U.S. should provide these refugees with the chance to help

defend the country against its adversaries. According to the U.S. Department of State, of the 67,000 Afghans to resettle in the U.S., over 5,171 refugees resettled in Virginia as of 22 February 2022 (Montoyo-Galvez, C., 2022).

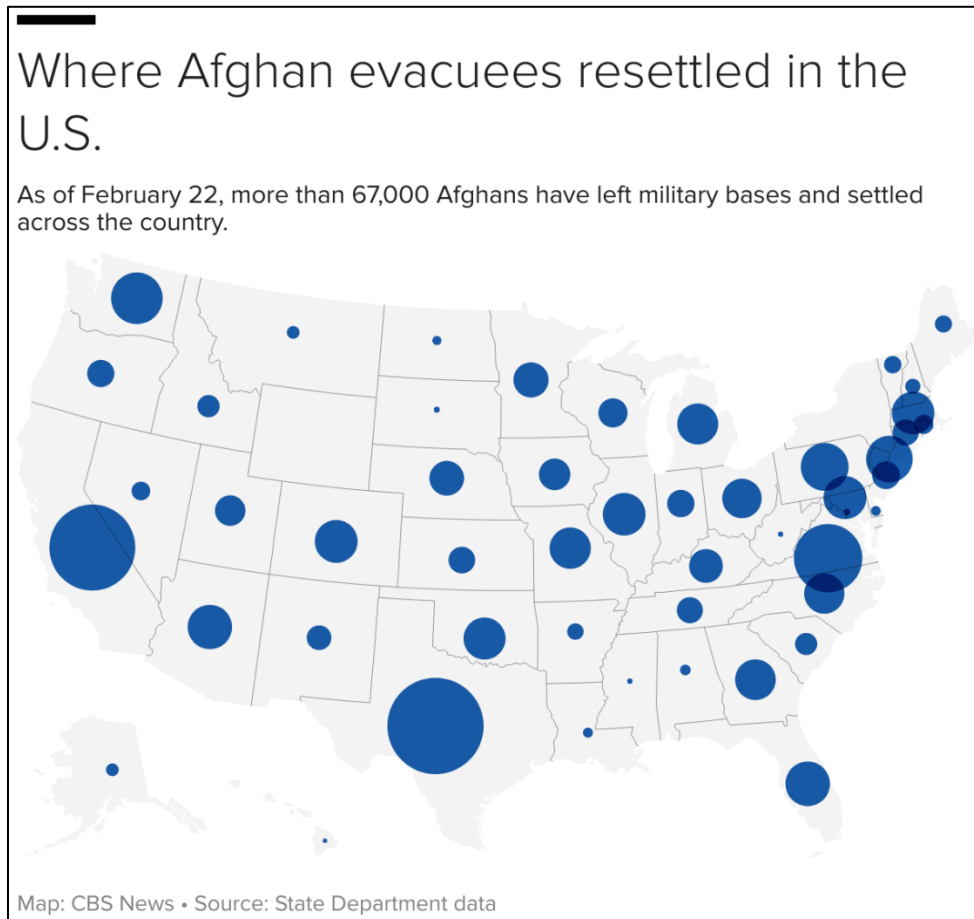


Figure 3: Montoyo-Galvez, *Here's where Afghan evacuees have resettled in the U.S.*, 2022

I am the son of an immigrant mother from the Philippines and an Irish American father from New York City. Life was not easy for either of my parents growing up. My mother was one of eight children living on a subsistence farm in the southern Philippines without running water or electricity. Both of my father's parents left him to grow up with an older half-brother, and my father grew up during the urban decline and gang violence of 1970s New York City. Neither one of them gave up on their belief that their children would have a better life in America. The life I live today is thanks to my parents believing in the American Dream. I do not have children of my

own yet, but one day I want to pass onto them this belief. I do not believe the American Dream is something that should come true for only a select few. Quite the contrary, it should come true for everyone who wants to come to America! However, it cannot come true if we turn our backs on those in need like our Afghan brothers and sisters who fought alongside us against the Taliban. One of the most humbling Afghan refugee experiences for me was during a taxi ride with a close friend of mine that I served with in Afghanistan. This was last winter, only three months after the fall of Kabul, and we had not seen each other since the collapse of the Afghan government. Mahmoud, our taxi driver, had the look and bearing of someone who had also served in the military, and sure enough once we got to talking, we learned Mahmoud was an officer in the Afghan Army forced to flee with half his family. I vividly remember him telling us how the Taliban forced his sister's family to go into hiding to avoid their retribution. Even with all that had befallen him and his family, there was no defeat in Mahmoud's voice, only an acknowledgement that times were hard. He also had a conviction to his eyes that only someone who knows the price of freedom can have. As U.S. veterans of Afghanistan, we disagreed with the way the U.S. pulled out of Afghanistan and left so many of our allies behind, but Mahmoud did not begrudge us or hold us at fault. He blamed the Afghan government for running and not giving the Afghan Army the tools to keep fighting. Often, I have found myself thinking that Afghans like Mahmoud are much more deserving of the freedoms and comforts that we as Americans take for granted every day. One day I will have children of my own, and I will instill in them the conviction that people from diverse cultures and countries, like Mahmoud and his family, deserve freedom and safety as we do. President John F. Kennedy expanded on it better than I ever could, "...It is proper that we now, as descendants of refugees and immigrants,

continue our long humanitarian tradition of helping those who are forced to flee...” (Kennedy, J.F., 1965).

There are detractors in the U.S. who disagree with accepting refugees from Afghanistan. These detractors claim the process for admitting refugees is too lax, and the possibility of admitting a terrorist posing as a refugee is too great a risk. One common analogy used is asking whether a person would eat a bag of poisoned skittles without knowing which have poison and which ones are safe to eat. However, as the Department of Homeland Security notes, the “screening and vetting process [for Afghan refugees] involves biometric and biographic screenings conducted by intelligence, law enforcement, and counterterrorism professionals from the Departments of Homeland Security and Defense, as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), and additional intelligence community partners prior to their arrival in the United States. If someone fails these checks while they are still overseas, they will not be permitted to board a flight to the United States” (Department of Homeland Security, 2022). The process of safely admitting Afghan refugees is one of the most rigorous and effective undertakings in recent U.S. history. The members of the intelligence community and law enforcement who undertake this task are doing their due diligence and know what is at stake if they fail. There is also one story from the Holy Bible that might provide a proper response to the poisoned skittles. In the Old Testament Book of Genesis, God speaks with the prophet Abraham about the sinners in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. God tells Abraham he has decided to destroy both cities because of their sinful ways, but Abraham does something truly remarkable: Abraham argues with God over this decision and reminds God about the nature of passing judgement on the righteous and the wicked. “And Abraham came near and said, “Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose

there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis. 18.16-33). Abraham even talks God into sparing Sodom and Gomorrah if Abraham can find five righteous men amongst the wicked instead of the initial fifty. While Sodom and Gomorrah were both destroyed in the end, the lesson still stands that casting judgment on the righteous and the wicked as one in the same is completely amoral and unacceptable.

The fall of Afghanistan is a defining moment for the United States in the 21st Century. When I talk to my children about the War in Afghanistan, I will hold back tears of frustration and futility. There will be painful feelings of failure and thoughts that it was all for nothing. However, I will have a sense of pride and honor knowing the U.S. did not turn its backs on of our friends and allies in Afghanistan. The struggle of the people of Afghanistan will continue under Taliban rule, and it will take decade for peace and prosperity to finally arrive in that country. Until that time comes, the U.S. should make every effort to give refuge and welcome to any person fleeing Afghanistan who desires life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We as Americans should support the refugees of Afghan, not only because of our history as a promised land for the oppressed, or because welcoming immigrants and refugees helps strengthen and improve America, but because maintaining the very heart and soul of the America as a force for good depends on it.

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