

In this time of heated debate and intense emotions, it is crucial that we do our best to keep a level head and refrain from rushing to judgement.

It has been reported that I oppose the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Vermont. This is not the case. The story only reported part of my argument, and I feel a responsibility to clarify my stance. I do not do this to appease one side or another; I do this because it is my duty to give Vermonters all of the information, and let you form your opinions from there.

The primary responsibility of any government is to keep its citizens safe. Many Americans fear, in the wake of the attacks in Paris, that our national security is at risk. Whether you agree with that position or not is up to you. However, I believe it is incumbent upon the federal government to reassure Americans that they are being kept safe and the refugee resettlement program is not a threat to national security.

What I propose is that we take a brief pause, verify the security process by better explaining it to the public, and resume the program. I know the White House is providing information to the public, which can be viewed online, about the security and vetting procedures for refugees. This is a strong first step, and one which every concerned American must take advantage of.

Verifying the integrity of the security process for the refugee program -- and explaining it to people -- is a reasonable course of action to take. Simply dismissing their concerns by saying the program is "rigorous" without explaining precisely how it is structured and how it works to ensure security only adds to peoples' concerns and adds fuel to the political fire.

We must move past the partisan political narrative on this issue; this is far too important and complex to be oversimplified by political rhetoric. That type of rhetoric further distracts from the need to verify our security standards and aid peaceful refugees in need. And hateful speech or prejudice against an entire group of people based on the actions of an extremist few has no place in our country.

My ultimate goal is to ensure the program moves forward with security protocols Vermonters have confidence in. We are a nation of immigrants, and a nation of opportunity; I welcome those who come here seeking a peaceful, prosperous life. I've actually called for us to encourage more legal immigrants to come to Vermont.

We mustn't forget that terrorism is intended to frighten us and incite anger that divides us. We cannot allow them to scare us into denying help to peaceful, law-abiding people in need, and we cannot let terrorists define our values. Surrendering our commitment to help others, when we know it can be done safely, only hands the terrorists a victory and a recruiting tool.

To those who say we need to address our own challenges first, I offer these thoughts: You're right. We have homelessness, poverty and violence here at home. But the capacity and compassion of America, in my opinion, is deep enough and strong enough to address all of these needs. Certainly not overnight, but definitely over time. Our work to make America a better, stronger, more prosperous nation includes welcoming all peaceful people who share our commitment to the American ideals of freedom and liberty. And history proves that legal immigration of peaceful, freedom-loving people lifts us up and moves us forward.

President Ronald Reagan frequently spoke of America as the world's "shining city on a hill." It was an image first invoked, he noted, by a Pilgrim seeking refuge on our shores. In his farewell to the nation, he

said: "...it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still."

A portion of what is engraved on the Statue of Liberty is a reminder of that fact, as well:

"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

It is a complicated time and the crisis in the Middle East is a complicated issue. But once the American people are walked through the federal security protocols, we should once again welcome those in search of the hope and opportunity that America offers.

We must never surrender our core American values for any reason – certainly not fear. We must always remain that beacon of freedom and hope. We must always be the world's shining city on the hill.