

Rather Than Closing Our Borders in Fear, Consider the Benefits of Opening Our Doors to Immigrant Students

Sabina Magliocco (February 05, 2017)



Were it not for the United States' earlier generous stance towards foreign students, even those from former enemy nations, I would not be here myself. My father came to the United States in 1953 on one of the first Fulbright scholarships. And even though he came from Italy, an enemy nation during much of WWII, he and countless others like him were welcomed to the United States through these scholarships.

I spent most of this week helping students in my program who are affected by the immigration ban to figure out their next steps; if they leave the country to go home for the summer, they won't be allowed to return. All are here legally as part of exchanges with other universities, or as international students (whose tuition rates are three times those of in-state residents). Most are from nations with a great deal of instability; their lives could be at risk when they go back. The very opposite of



terrorists, they are fleeing terrorism. They came here to study and experience freedom, and have embraced American values of pluralism and autonomy. Now we're treating them like enemies. They feel let down and afraid.

A child of immigrants, I cannot help but muse on the connections between us: were it not for the United States' earlier generous stance towards foreign students, even those from former enemy nations, I would not be here myself. My father came to the United States in 1953 on one of the first [Fulbrights](#) [2]. These scholarships were funded by Congress after the Second World War in order to foster greater connections between nations and prevent the rise of the forces that had led to the war in the first place: fascism, Nazism, and authoritarianism. Even though my father came from Italy, an enemy nation during much of WWII, he and countless others like him were welcomed to the United States through these scholarships. The philosophy at the time was that exposure to American ideals would help democracy spread throughout the globe, countering the Soviet threat.

After completing his studies, my father chose to remain in the United States, eventually becoming a citizen. He had his own reasons for emigrating: he had survived both fascism and Nazism, and wanted to ensure his children grew up far from the specter of the forces that had so negatively affected his life and that of my mother. His father, my grandfather, had lost his life to fascism: he died in Mussolini's military campaign in East Africa in 1936, leaving my grandmother to raise her children alone on a widow's pension. During the Nazi occupation of Rome in 1943, my father, then a young teenager, felt such revulsion for the Germans that he ran weapons to the Italian resistance.

My mother's family was Jewish, and during the German occupation, hid other Jews and draft deserters in their house in Rome. My mother and cousins were sent to board in a Catholic convent; the family knew that if the Nazis discovered the safe house, everyone would have been killed, including the children. I grew up hearing these stories; to me, Nazis were not shadowy figures in some black-and-white newsreel, but the stuff of nightmares. Where other children might have feared the boogey man, I was afraid of Nazis. The reassurance my parents always offered was that the Nazis were long ago and far away; they could not get me here in the United States. Now it seems that they have.

Despite the considerable prejudice he suffered as a result of his ethnicity and his thick accent, my father remained throughout his life a staunch patriot, not of the trite, red-white-and-blue, flag-waving variety, but in his steadfast belief in the Constitution and the rule of law, and his gratitude towards the nation that had helped him escape hardship and establish himself in a new land.

This current wave of xenophobia in which my innocent students are caught up appears not only inhumane, but misguided. Senator J. William Fulbright, the founder of the Fulbright scholarship program, was right: opening our doors to immigrants who want to absorb American values and benefit from this nation's opportunities will ultimately lead to greater national and international security than closing our borders in fear.

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