

## WHY IS GEORGE BUSH CLOSING THE DOOR ON SOVIET REFUGEES?

**T**he Bush Administration announced last week that it plans to limit the flow of Soviet refugees to the United States. The Administration wants to impose a ceiling of 50,000 on the number of Soviet refugees entering the U.S. next year, even though the State Department estimates that at least 150,000 will seek refuge in the U.S. Bush also plans to reorganize the way Soviet refugees are processed by U.S. immigration authorities, closing the main U.S. processing center in Rome and transferring its functions to the American embassy in Moscow. These changes in policy, however well-intentioned, will make emigration of refugees from the Soviet Union more difficult. In effect, it will close America's door to those who are fleeing political, religious, and ethnic persecution in the Soviet Union. Instead, the U.S. should welcome those able to make their escape.

**The Administration's Case.** The Bush Administration justifies its proposed new limits on Soviet refugees entering this country by claiming that processing them is too costly; that the consular and immigration services in Rome, Vienna, and Moscow are overburdened; and that reforms in the Soviet Union virtually have ended the persecution of Jews and evangelical Christians.

Focusing on budgetary constraints, however, is extremely misleading. Although the U.S. government bears some of the costs of resettling refugees, much more of the burden is assumed by such private agencies as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Church World Service. For each refugee, they spend two to three times the approximately \$5,000 that the U.S. government does. More important, these costs are vastly outweighed by the enormous contribution that these refugees have made and will make to the American economy and society. Far from being a burden, the generally highly educated and skilled Soviet refugees are an asset, and they quickly begin paying dividends to the country that gave them refuge.

The increased costs of processing the new refugees do indeed pose a real problem, and there are real budgetary constraints. Currently, however, a very large proportion of such costs result from delays of two to three months in processing applications. Streamlining these procedures, such as appointing a Refugee Coordinator in Rome to ensure efficient cooperation among the different agencies involved, would save money that could be spent on handling a greater volume. Even as it admits that an enormous backlog of applicants exists, however, the Bush Administration's plan will make the situation worse. At present, most Soviet refugees are processed in Rome and Vienna. The Administration, however, wants to transfer these functions to the embassy in Moscow. Yet, the planned increase of personnel in Moscow handling refugees from three to six falls far short of the more than twenty positions to be eliminated in Rome alone.

**Overwhelming Bureaucracy.** Billed as a cost-cutting and even, curiously, humanitarian move, this reorganization will have a chilling effect on potential Soviet emigrants. Not only will their applications likely be side-tracked by an overwhelmed bureaucracy in the American embassy in Moscow; they will have to declare openly their intention to emigrate to the U.S. and face the

retribution of their own government and society for an indefinite period. In Rome and Vienna, on the other hand, they are beyond the Kremlin's reach and can more freely express their fears of persecution and argue their case for refugee status.

**Gorbomania?** The most alarming aspect of the plan to limit Soviet refugees, however, are the statements by Administration officials that reforms in the Soviet Union have made persecution of Jews and evangelical Christians a thing of the past. In her September 13 testimony before the House Judiciary Committee, U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs Jewel LaFontant stated that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's changes in the Soviet Union now mean that Jews and evangelical Christians could remain in the Soviet Union, or even return there, without fear of persecution. When asked what would happen to those refugees denied access to the U.S. under the new quota, she said "they can go to Israel, or return to Russia."

There is an inherent contradiction in what LaFontant said. If there is no persecution, then why accept any applicants at all? If persecution continues, then why place an arbitrary limit on those who may escape? Such remarks indicate that LaFontant, a distinguished lawyer, has been poorly served by her staff, who apparently did not brief her thoroughly on the matter. Despite Gorbachev's many announced changes, conditions for Jews and evangelical Christians in the Soviet Union remain very difficult. Given his extensive expertise of Soviet affairs, Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger quickly should have corrected the impression that LaFontant's remarks left. Instead, he jumped to her defense last week before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration.

Left uncorrected, the Eagleburger/LaFontant remarks send the wrong signals to the Soviet regime and the Soviet people. They imply that the U.S. believes that Gorbachev's reforms already have produced a tolerant society in which fear of government persecution has been eliminated. They imply that those leaving the Soviet Union no longer should be presumed to be refugees but must prove it. Eagleburger and LaFontant surely did not intend to leave this impression. They thus should modify their remarks, for they know that despite the euphoria over Gorbachev in some quarters in the West, the Soviet Union remains a repressive society from which reasonable people would want to flee.

**Transparent Fiction.** The Bush Administration also is in danger of promoting Soviet propaganda. Unwilling to admit that large numbers of its Jewish population wish to escape from severe religious and ethnic persecution, the Soviet Union has always claimed that Jewish emigration involves only small numbers who wish to resettle in Israel for mainly religious reasons or to reunite with family members there. So transparent is this fiction that the regime requires even the evangelical Christians to apply for visas to Israel. Forced by the Soviet government to apply for Israeli visas as their only means of escape, only about one-tenth of these people actually choose Israel; the overwhelming majority seek refuge in America. The denial of entry to the U.S. would give them no choice but to go to Israel. In forcing them to do so, the U.S. government would be helping to validate the Soviet line regarding Jewish emigration.

America has a proud and generous record in dealing with refugees. The U.S. has given refuge to tens of millions of these and other immigrants, especially those no one else wanted. It is this which has made America, throughout its history, truly the chosen land. And the refugees coming to the U.S. are an affirmation of fundamental American values. The plaque on the Statue of Liberty promises hope to those "yearning to breathe free." The Bush Administration should not put new obstacles in their way nor exaggerate the problems of offering refuge. The Administration should move quickly to ensure that those fleeing Soviet persecution remain welcome in America.

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