

OPINION

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OUR VIEW

ENOUGH

this is not America

A television commentator recently summed up the immigration mess created by President Donald Trump by paraphrasing Winston Churchill's words early in World War II.

After Trump retreated from a policy that separated children from their parents, the TV news show guest said: "This isn't the end. It's not the beginning of the end. But we have reached the end of the beginning."

Whether incarcerated babies, toddlers and older children will be reunited with their parents remains to be seen. The enthusiasm with which the separation directive was enforced has not been matched with a corresponding level of competence. While kids sit in cages, many of their parents are deported. Those who are not orphaned for the rest of their lives will, at the very least, be permanently scarred by the experience.

A broad mass of Americans watched this travesty play out in real time and vehemently rejected the Trump policy by saying: This is not America. This is not who we are.

We add our voice to that chorus.

We are all immigrants. Our ancestors all came here seeking better lives, whether freedom from persecution or a chance to provide a decent living for their families. And over the centuries, every wave of immigration to America has been met with a measure of abuse from those who preceded them. The newcomers were often treated as subhuman and employed as virtual slave labor, enduring racial animus that would have been unthinkable today — until now.

When a million Irish fled starvation and death in their homeland during the potato famine of 1845-49, they were immediately relegated to the lowest rung of society. "No Irish need apply" signs were common. So what did they do? They set to work building our roads, railroads and cities. They persevered and assimilated.

When 4 million Italians arrived between 1880 and 1924 to escape grinding rural poverty, most began their new lives as manual laborers, toiling in the factories, mines and the fields. They discovered that not only were the streets not paved with gold, but they were expected to pave them.

When large numbers of Chinese began arriving in Astoria in 1876 to work in the canneries, the pattern repeated itself. Often referred to as "coolies," they were the workhorses of the city's fish processing industry. They were widely scorned as human beings, but they went on to build key elements of the town. The founder of The Astorian, DeWitt Clinton Ireland, did his part in making the Chinese an object of derision. Then we had the Exclusion Act, sending Chinese home.

And in the 1920s, when the Ku Klux Klan rose to power in Astoria and around the state, a hatred of blacks, immigrants, communists and Catholics boiled to the surface.

It would be hard to find a small American town with as much evidence of immigrants' contributions than Astoria. Look at the rich contributions of Scandinavians — Swedes, Finns, Danes, Norwegians and Icelanders. Today, Hispanic immigrants are essential to our workforce and our regional economy.

What, then, are we to make of the



Residents of Chinatown in Astoria prepare for a Regatta Festival at the turn of the 20th century.

Clatsop County Historical Society



This cartoon was published around the time of the 1887 massacre of Chinese workers in Hells Canyon.

Library of Congress

'America cannot afford a leader who treats people with such malicious and careless abandon. It is morally wrong. History will not judge him well, nor should it.'

current wave of xenophobia sweeping our nation against Hispanics and Muslims?

Trump's election has unleashed a level of racial and religious invective unknown in our recent history, at least outside the South. Many otherwise upstanding Americans suddenly find it acceptable to publicly castigate anyone who doesn't look, sound or worship like them. They've been emboldened by the leadership of a president who not only doesn't represent "all Americans," as he promised in his inaugural address, but insults many of them daily via his Twitter feed. The voices of hatred have emerged from closets and dining rooms and spilled out onto the streets, with a full-throated roar.

Trump has brought the full force of the nation's military and law enforcement apparatus to bear on an issue that most of the country doesn't think is a problem. A record-high 75 percent of Americans, including majorities of all party groups, think immigration is a good thing for the U.S. — up slightly from 71 percent last year, according to a recent Gallup poll. Just 19 percent of the public considers immigration a bad thing.

The heavy-handed tactics — often featuring agents outfitted in full military gear using armored vehicles, helicopters and police dogs — are worthy of a totalitarian state. Entire factories full of employees are rounded up and checked for citizenship papers. Buses far from



Columbia River Maritime Museum
Chinese cannery workers in Astoria.

the border are boarded without search warrants. Agents are stationed at courthouses, libraries and other public places.

In one local case, a hardworking, law-abiding immigrant in Pacific County was hunted down, carried off to detention and separated from his family because he dared to speak to a newspaper about his experiences.

One cannot help thinking how things would have turned out had a demagogue like Trump been at the helm during the civil rights movement. Would he have sent in troops to desegregate the University of Mississippi and Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas? Or would he have arrested the black students instead, for daring to demand an equal education?

It is apparent that Trump launched this policy of separating children from parents with no plan. He has debased our national conversation in order to make political points. He has normalized the denigration of the other, whose victim this month is Hispanics at the border. His most damning tactic was to turn this group of human beings into objects to be treated inhumanely by agents on the government payroll.

America cannot afford a leader who treats people with such malicious and careless abandon. It is morally wrong. History will not judge him well, nor should it.