

Welcoming these kids is the least we can do

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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[These attempts to physically blockade busloads of Central American kids](#) are just embarrassing and sad. The protesters aren't somehow citizen-enforcing immigration law—the kids are already in custody!—and they aren't simply making a political statement. They're trying to prevent the authorities from doing their job under the law. That's a pretty radical step to take on behalf of nativism and xenophobia.

Here's a distinctly unradical approach: [Keep the kids here](#), safe and cared for, until they can have a proper hearing, as the law requires. Make sure they have lawyers. Determine if they qualify for refugee status, [as the U.N. insists most of them do](#). Use deportation very, very cautiously.

Due process and the rule of law for potential refugees—that's not bleeding-heart idealism. It's a minimum standard of the American way. Give me, if not your tired and your poor and your huddled masses, at least your downright persecuted and traumatized.

Idealism would go farther: How could we possibly send such desperate children back to such dangerous places, regardless of how we parse their precise reasons for coming? Give them all refugee status, for the love of God. Take them in.

Pragmatically, I just want to see that we at least afford these children the protections our own laws require. Morally, I'm sad to live in a country that would force any of them to go back. Emotionally, I wish I could put them all up in my

apartment.

Words like “refugee” and “asylum,” after all, have a rare ability to appeal to Americans’ sense of goodness and benevolence. Taking in refugees, giving asylum—these are things that generous people from a better place do for helpless people from a worse place. And some pragmatism and limits are required; we generous people can’t just go handing out our generosity willy-nilly!

But we aren’t better. Safer and wealthier, yes. Civilly more stable, certainly. But not morally superior. We aren’t a good country considering whether to go above and beyond our duty to help people from a bad country whose badness exists in isolation from our goodness.

On the contrary, we’ve done a lot to help create the problems that exist in Central America.

[Two of](#) the major gangs terrorizing El Salvador and the whole region were born in L.A. Then [we started deporting them](#) and their violence to Central America, where U.S. policy already had [an ugly legacy of support for violent oppression](#).

In Honduras, the level of violence and oppression has [gone way up](#) since the 2009 coup, which the U.S. may [have actively supported](#); at a minimum our condemnation was conspicuously and tragically absent. And after the coup, the U.S. [continued to support](#) Honduras’ oppressive new regime.

We should welcome these unaccompanied minors with open arms. But if the idea of accepting refugees or granting asylum makes us think proud thoughts about the Statue of Liberty or whatever, it probably shouldn’t. This isn’t really America being great. It’s more like the least we can do.