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Walter F. Mondale served as senator from Minnesota from 1964 to 1976, U.S. vice president from 1977 to 1981 and U.S. ambassador to Japan from 1993 to 1996. He was the Democratic presidential nominee in 1984.

Forty years ago this month, I stood before the Geneva Meeting on Refugees and Displaced Persons in South-East Asia at a particularly grave moment in time. The world was in the grips of a humanitarian crisis as hundreds of thousands of people fled the south of Vietnam, many seeking protection from political persecution. Having [visited the overflowing refugee camps](#) in Thailand, I knew firsthand that many people were desperate for shelter and safety. Thousands of men, women and children were dying at sea. The Geneva [conference](#), convened by the United Nations, was a wake-up call meant to draw the attention of the world to a horrific situation.

We are once again in a humanitarian refugee crisis of unprecedented proportions. Today, we are confronted with a president doing [everything in his power](#) to undermine or ignore U.S. laws and regulations relating to refugees and asylum seekers. A country once recognized as a respected humanitarian leader, the United States now slams the door to all but a relative few. The Trump administration has dramatically slashed refugee admissions numbers, from [84,995 during President Barack Obama's last year](#) in office to just [22,491 last year](#). But even that isn't enough for the administration, which is reportedly considering [zeroing out admissions entirely](#) next year. And this at a time when the numbers fleeing religious and political persecution, violence, torture and war are [higher than at any time since World War II](#).

I never thought I would repeat the words [I spoke in Geneva](#) so long ago, but they ring in my ears once again: Let us do something meaningful something profound to stem this misery.

The events leading up to the Geneva conference were dire, much like events of today at the heart of the refugee crisis. A heartbreaking and infuriating difference between then and now is that 40 years ago, the United States led the charge to rally support for increased humanitarian aid and refugee resettlement. Today, it is the United States that is systematically dismantling the refugee protection framework we were instrumental in constructing in the first place.

As a result of our government's leadership in 1979, countries in Southeast Asia [made provisions](#) to offer temporary asylum to refugees. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) introduced the [Orderly Departure Program](#), an attempt to improve the safety of departure and travel to other countries for resettlement. [Western countries agreed](#) to boost resettlement, welcoming hundreds of thousands of refugees. Following the Geneva conference, the U.S. [Refugee Act of 1980](#) was signed into law by President Jimmy Carter after first passing with full bipartisan support in the Senate. The act [nearly tripled](#) the number of refugees the United States would admit, and, perhaps most important, amended the definition of refugee to include someone with well-founded fear of persecution.

In short, hundreds of thousands of lives were saved.

By contrast, President Trump has [twisted the perception of refugees and asylum seekers](#) into an unrecognizable lie. But there are [the facts](#): Asylum seekers and refugees leave their countries because they have no choice for many, if they stay, they will be persecuted, subjected to traumatic events such as [torture, or killed](#). In fact, the [Center for Victims of Torture estimates](#) that as many as 44 percent of refugees, asylees and asylum seekers already in the United States are survivors of torture. All people have the [legal right](#) to seek protection from persecution and, just as important, the human right, as noted in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). According to the [UNHCR](#), there are 70.8 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, 25.9 million of whom are refugees and 3.5 million of whom are asylum seekers. And yet, the Trump administration has admitted [only 21,260 refugees](#) so far this fiscal year.

Make no mistake, I firmly believe in and support nations' prerogatives to control their borders. But it is imperative that the United States does this in a manner consistent with both U.S. and international law and that reflects America's founding principle of welcoming those most in need.

There is hope. While most Americans do not have the privileges my office afforded me in 1979, nor the platforms upon which to speak

out, there are steps everyone can take to make a real, tangible impact. Contact your representatives in Washington. Make the case for an increase in refugee admissions. Speak up against this administration's tactics of cruelty and inhumane treatment of asylum seekers at our border. And, of course, change can be made with a vote when the time comes. When enough voices are raised, change can happen. As we promised in Geneva, it is time to take action: History will not forgive us if we fail. History will not forget us if we succeed.

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