

As a Young Senator, Biden Supported Keeping 'Boat People' Out of the U.S.

Jack Beyrer - August 31, 2020

As a freshman senator in 1975, Joe Biden joined Sen. Robert Byrd (D., W.Va.) in **opposing legislation allowing 130,000 Vietnam War refugees asylum in the United States, including thousands of children.** President Gerald Ford proposed a Vietnam refugee relief program that would settle thousands of Vietnamese and Cambodian families in the United States. The bill was met with resistance from a Democratic majority in Congress. Sen. Byrd cited fear of admitting "undesirables" such as "barmaids, prostitutes, and criminals" to the country.

Biden also took issue with Ford's proposal. During a Foreign Relations Committee hearing with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, **Biden announced his concern with welcoming the refugees**, charging that the Senate had not been informed of the number of refugees that the White House intended to offer safe harbor to. **Many of the refugees escaped communist rule and mass murder in Vietnam and Cambodia on leaky fishing boats.** Thousands of these boat people, as they were called, died due to piracy, starvation, and drowning.

While the Indochina Refugee and Migration Assistance Act ultimately passed in May 1975, Senate efforts to obstruct assistance proved effective. The Senate cut over \$100 million in funding from the House version of the bill, allocating \$405 million toward refugee settlement rather than \$507 million. **Biden was one of only 20 senators to abstain from voting** when the bill passed the Senate. Byrd—Biden's colleague and an early opponent of Ford's plan—was a member of the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan as a young man.

President Ford told reporters he was "damned mad" about the pushback from Biden and others.

"I am primarily very upset because the United States has had a long tradition of opening its doors to immigrants of all countries," he told reporters following the opposition. Ford expressed disappointment with liberal colleagues who had voiced support for human rights but obstructed the legislation. "It just burns me up, these great humanitarians," he said. "They just want to turn their backs." "We're a country built by immigrants from all areas of the world, and we've always been a very humanitarian nation, and when I read or heard the comments made a few days ago I was disappointed and very upset," he added.

Biden's current campaign platform **echoes Ford's sentiments on immigration.** His plan calls for "securing our values as a nation of immigrants."

"Under a Biden Administration, we will never turn our backs on who we are or that which makes us uniquely and proudly American," the plan reads. "The United States deserves an immigration policy that reflects our highest values as a nation."

The Biden campaign did not respond to a request for comment.