Letter to the Editor: Immigration order opposes American values

By: Jonathan Harrington

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On Friday, Jan. 27, President Trump signed an executive order barring Syrian refugees indefinitely and blocking entry into the United States for citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. This ill-conceived and rashly executed directive stands in stark opposition to the values of pluralism, equality and opportunity etched in the American experience. The devastating consequences reverberated immediately within the United States and around the globe.

Within hours, protests erupted at airports nationwide — JFK, Dulles, LAX and O’Hare saw thousands enter the terminals. By Saturday morning, immigrants’ rights groups filed a petition on behalf of Hameed Khalid Darweesh, a man who worked for more than ten years as an interpreter for U.S. troops fighting in Iraq. On Saturday night, U.S. District Court Judge Ann Donnelly ordered that any refugees and others detained at airports or in transit to the U.S.
should not be sent back to their home countries. By Sunday, Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly further clarified that the punitive measures would not apply to legal U.S. residents, including green card holders. Secretary Kelly, who is responsible for the nation’s customs and border patrol, was not consulted before the president signed the order.

Locally, Stony Brook University graduate student Vahideh Rasekhi was detained at JFK Airport over the weekend. Rasekhi was returning from Iran where she was visiting family. At a rally on Feb. 1, the university’s president stated that another unnamed student is still unable to return to campus. Around the world, foreign leaders have condemned the travel ban, over a thousand U.S. State Department diplomats have signed a petition explaining how the order will alienate our allies and even the Vatican has criticized the president’s position.

If the American people are receiving some benefit in exchange for the resultant confusion, Islamophobia, reputational damage, and economic loss from what is likely an unconstitutional overreach, the White House is keeping that secret well. The fact is that the president’s order is not really making us any safer; in actuality, the travel ban is designed only to appeal to a minority of the president’s political consistency.

After all, the U.S. has a rigorous process for vetting refugees that is tightly controlled by our intelligence community. Following an initial screening process by the United Nations, U.S. agencies like the FBI, Department of Homeland Security and State Department take over. These agencies use overlapping and repetitive methods, including extensive interviews, health checks, biometric data analysis and background checks, to dive into refugees’ backgrounds. Syrian refugees in particular must undergo additional steps of security clearing — the entire process can take an average of 18 to 24 months to complete.

The system is exhaustive, and it works — President Trump’s Muslim ban, on the other hand, definitively does not.

Set aside the fact that the executive order, using Sept. 11 as its rationale, does not ban those who share a nationality with any of the hijackers. The list is something of a mystery; there have been zero deaths caused by immigrants from its seven countries since 1975, and it conveniently exempts several countries where the Trump family happens to conduct business, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

The real problem, however, is that there exists no magical list of countries — Muslim-majority or otherwise — from which banning travelers could keep us perfectly safe from any future attack. This ban of desperate refugees and innocent immigrants is ultimately an empty gesture that will do nothing but embarrass the United States on the world stage and alienate many of the very people we rely upon as partners in the fight against ISIL. And to add fuel to the fire, these policies play directly into the hands of ISIL, who argue — like the Trump Administration — that Muslims cannot peacefully coexist in the West.

The United States has long been a nation built on openness and access to opportunity. We are at our strongest when we offer those suffering from radicalism or death access to our prosperity and a chance to succeed on their merits and live up to our values. Every nation must take reasonable steps to protect its citizens, and America has historically excelled at striking the balance between liberty and security. That balance is now in peril.

President Trump’s executive order is the opening salvo of a presidency that appears bent on retreating from America’s leading role in the liberal-capitalist world order that we forged
following World War II. Whether it is protectionist trade policy, retreating from the democratic bulwark that is NATO, or endorsing torture, America stands to lose more than our alliances, reputation or international influence. We stand to lose our national soul.

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