

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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IN PAST DEBATES OVER REFUGEES OUR LEADERS APPEALED TO OUR IDEALS, NOT OUR FEARS

By John Huebscher

The current debate over whether to welcome refugees fleeing the carnage in Syria reminded me of how one leader spoke to a similar situation some years ago.

Clifford “Tiny” Kruger represented much of northern Wisconsin in the State Senate for 34 years from the mid-1940’s until 1983. First a Progressive, then a Republican, Krueger was the GOP Senate floor leader from 1975 to 1981. When he retired, a veteran observer of the Capitol scene described him as “the conscience of the common man.”

That conscience was very evident in May of 1980. Tiny was asked to offer a few remarks at the Memorial Day observance in Rhinelander. Then as now, the issue of whether to accept refugees from another country was a hot topic.

Earlier that year Fidel Castro allowed over 120,000 Cubans to leave Cuba for the United States. A small number had been in jail as political prisoners or for criminal offenses. A few had been in mental health facilities. Nearly all sought a better life in our country. President Carter suffered much criticism for agreeing to accept these refugees. Some in Wisconsin and elsewhere wanted no part of them. Then, as now, these opponents cited safety as a reason to say no.

Tiny could have stoked the fears that these Cuban refugees would threaten our safety. He didn’t.

Tiny could have suggested these Cubans didn’t deserve special treatment. He didn’t.

As Republican leader, Tiny could have used the angst over the refugees to score political points against President Carter. He didn’t.

Instead, while acknowledging their concerns, Tiny told his constituents in Rhinelander that those refugees should be made welcome. He recalled our American tradition of welcoming those from other lands who desired the chance to build a better life for themselves and their families in our nation. He cited our tradition of helping those in need. He also noted that nations are impoverished when their people flee them and those who welcome them are enriched. Recalling the Americans then being held hostage in Iran, he noted that they included young Marines named Lopez and Gallegos and suggested that future patriots could be found in the children of those coming from Cuba that spring.

In short, given the chance to demagogue an emotional issue and feed fear and resentment of those who were different from his constituents, Tiny instead appealed to what Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.” To put it another way, he exercised moral leadership.

Not everyone who heard Tiny that day agreed with him. But, overall, Tiny’s constituents appreciated his commitment to our ideals and they respected him for giving voice to those ideals. 1980 was an election year for Tiny. Six weeks later, when he filed his nomination papers no one challenged him.

Now it is our turn to give voice to the “the conscience of the common man.” May we respond as Tiny Krueger suggested we do that Memorial Day in Rhinelander.

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