

Statement by the President upon signing the Displaced Persons Act Harry S. Truman - 1948

Il corsivo è stato aggiunto

*"It is with very great reluctance that I have signed S. 2242, the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. If the Congress were still in session, I would return this bill without my approval and urge that a fairer, more humane bill be passed. In its present form this bill is flagrantly discriminatory. It mocks the American tradition of fair play. Unfortunately, it was not passed until the last day of the session. If I refused to sign this bill now, there would be no legislation on behalf of displaced persons until the next session of the Congress. It is a close question whether this bill is better or worse than no bill at all. After careful consideration I have decided, however, that it would not be right to penalize the beneficiaries of this bill on account of the injustices perpetrated against others who should have been included within its provisions. I have therefore signed the bill in the hope that its injustices will be rectified by the Congress at the first opportunity. Americans of all religious faiths and political beliefs will find it hard to understand, as I do, why the 80th Congress delayed action on this subject until the end of this session, with the result that most attempts to improve the bill were frustrated. The 80th Congress certainly had ample time to produce a satisfactory bill. Eighteen months ago, in my State of the Union Message, I stated that I did not feel that the United States had done its part in the admission of displaced persons. I pointed out that congressional assistance in the form of new legislation was needed. Six months later, on July 7, 1947, the Congress had not yet acted, I sent a special message on the subject. I reminded the Congress: 'We are dealing with a human problem, a world tragedy . . . I urge the Congress to press forward with its consideration of this subject and to pass suitable legislation as speedily as possible.' To my regret, the Congress adjourned last summer without passing any displaced persons legislation. Again, on January 7, 1948, I urged the Congress 'to pass suitable legislation at once so that this Nation may do its share in caring for homeless and suffering refugees of all faiths. I believe that the admission of these persons will add to the strength and energy of the Nation.' The Congress did not act 'at once.' The Senate committee charged with the responsibility of rendering a report on January 10, 1948, asked for, and received, an extension to report on February 10. Instead of reporting on February 10, it reported on March a. The bill which it finally reported, without a single public hearing, was roundly and deservedly criticized by all who were interested in achieving a fair solution of this problem. Through one device or another, debate on the bill by the Senate was postponed from the beginning of March until the end of May. The Senate bill was not passed until June 2. The House of Representatives in the meantime had delayed action and did not pass its bill until June 11. It was not until the last days of the session that the Senate and the House conferees met to put together a compromise. The compromise resulting from this hasty, last-minute action consisted largely of combining the worst features of both the Senate and House bills. I have analyzed closely the bill which was sent to me for signature. Its good points can be stated all too briefly: At long last, the principle is recognized that displaced persons should be admitted to the United States. Two hundred thousand displaced persons may be admitted in the next 2 years, as well as 2,000 recent Czech refugees and 3,000 orphans. The bad points of the bill are numerous. Together they form a pattern of discrimination and intolerance wholly inconsistent with the American sense of justice. *The bill discriminates in callous fashion against displaced persons of the Jewish faith. This brutal fact cannot be obscured by the maze of technicalities in the bill or by the protestations of some of its sponsors. The primary device used to discriminate against Jewish displaced persons is the provision restricting eligibility to those displaced persons who entered Germany, Austria, or Italy on or before December 22, 1945. Most of the Jewish displaced persons who had entered Germany, Austria, or Italy by that time have already left; and most of the Jewish displaced persons now in those areas arrived there after December 22, 1945, and hence are denied a chance to come to the United States under this bill. By this device more than 90 percent of the remaining Jewish displaced persons are definitely excluded. Even the eligible 10 percent are beset by numerous additional restrictions written into the bill. For all practical purposes, it must be frankly recognized, therefore, that this bill excludes Jewish displaced persons, rather than accepting a fair proportion of them along with other faiths.**

The bill also excludes many displaced persons of the Catholic faith who deserve admission. Many anti-Communist refugees of Catholic faith fled into the American zones after December 22, 1945, in order to escape persecution in countries dominated by a Communist form of government. These too are barred by the December 22, 1945, dateline.

It is inexplicable, except upon the abhorrent ground of intolerance, that this date should have been chosen instead of April 21, 1947, the date on which General Clay closed the displaced persons camps to further admissions. The Jewish and Catholic displaced persons who found asylum in our zones between December 22, 1945, and April 21, 1947, who are wrongly excluded by this bill, fled their native countries for the same basic reasons as Balts who came before December 22, 1945, and Czechs who came after January, 1948, who are rightly included. I sincerely hope that the Congress will remedy this gross discrimination at its earliest opportunity.

There are many other seriously objectionable features in the bill. Some of these are, as follows:

Except for orphans, the bill charges the displaced persons admitted under its provisions to future immigration quotas of their countries of birth, up to 50 percent of the quota per year. Under this system, 50 percent of some quotas will be "mortgaged" for generations. This is a most begrudging method of accepting useful and worthy people and will necessarily deprive many other worthy people of an opportunity to come to the United States in future years. Considering how few permanent immigrants were able to enter this country during the war, it would have been more equitable to admit the displaced persons as nonquota immigrants.

The bill requires that at least 40 percent of the displaced persons allowed to enter this country must come from areas which have been 'de facto annexed by a foreign power.' This guarantees a disproportionately high percentage of persons from particular areas. It would have been fairer to provide instead for the admission of persons in proportion to the numbers of each group in the displaced persons camps.

The bill reflects a singular lack of confidence by the Congress in the capacity and willingness of the people of the United States to extend a welcoming hand to the prospective immigrants. It contains many restrictive requirements, such as prior assurances of suitable employment and 'safe and sanitary housing', unnecessarily complicated investigation of each applicant, and burdensome reports from individual immigrants. I regret that the Congress saw fit to impose such niggardly conditions.

The bill submitted to me also emasculates the salutary provision of the House bill which provided for the granting of permanent residence status to a maximum of 15,000 displaced persons who are already lawfully in this country. The bill now requires a concurrent resolution of the Congress in favor of each individual after his application has been approved by the Attorney General. This requirement has the effect of perpetuating the cumbersome practice of special action by the Congress to adjust the status of individual aliens.

I know what a bitter disappointment this bill is--to the many displaced victims of persecution who looked to the United States for hope; to the millions of our citizens who wanted to help them in the finest American spirit; to the many Members of the Congress who fought hard but unsuccessfully for a decent displaced persons bill. I hope that this bitter disappointment will not turn to despair.

I have signed this bill, in spite of its many defects, in order not to delay further the beginning of a resettlement program and in the expectation that the necessary remedial action will follow when the Congress reconvenes.