



A patrol unit near the U.S./Mexico border. (Photo: Chuck Coker/Flickr)

## Child Refugees: The New Barbarians

BY THOMAS NAIL · August 19, 2014 · 10:00 AM

**The disturbing rhetoric around the recent rise in child refugees into the United States from Central America may be shaping popular opinion on upcoming immigration reform.**

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The United States' rhetorical response to the recent rise in child refugees into the U.S. from Central America is deeply disturbing. From the extreme to the mainstream media, the language being used to describe these children seeking asylum casts them as a *dangerous flood of barbarian invaders*. This pervasive rhetoric is, no doubt, at least partly responsible for the fact that most Americans (53 percent), [according to a recent Pew Research poll](#), and both major political parties now favor expediting asylum claims even if it means deporting eligible refugees. Political metaphors shape reality and the current discourse may be reshaping popular opinion on upcoming immigration reform, according to recent polls.

At the base of this disturbing rhetoric is the widespread use of two uncritically accepted political metaphors. The first is the metaphor of “dangerous waters,” described by Otto Santa Ana in his book *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in Contemporary American Public Discourse*. Across the political spectrum and the news media, the recent child refugees are being described as a “flood,” “surge,” “tidal wave,” or “deluge.” “Let’s not take on any more water on this sinking ship,” Pennsylvania Republican [Lou Barletta](#) told the *New York Times*. “Let’s patch the holes. Then we’ll decide what do we do with all this water that’s here.” “The surge in children crossing the border,” [CNN reports](#), “has forced authorities to open three temporary shelters at military bases.”

**Today, Central American refugees sleep in “squalid,” “cattle pen”-like camps and detention centers, just as defenseless Goth refugees taken in by the Romans were treated terribly by Roman standards.**

This is not neutral terminology. All of these metaphors imply that these children are uncontrollable, undifferentiated, and inanimate objects that pose a threat to our safety—like a storm or troop “surge.” Many writers are even uncritically referring to these

children as [Obama's Hurricane Katrina](#), i.e. a highly destructive natural catastrophe.

The second uncritically accepted political metaphor at work in the current discourse on child migrants is that they are “invaders.” The idea that immigrants and refugees are dangerous invaders is an ancient one that dates back to the Greek and Roman concept of “barbarians,” and has many other historical incarnations. In the U.S. this concept was re-animated in popular and political discourse most recently by Samuel Huntington in his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* to explicitly describe the “[Mexican immigrant invasion](#)” of American civilization.

For the last 15 years, right-wing author Patrick Buchanan and others have been popularizing this “barbarian invasion” metaphor for conservative audiences in the U.S.—and it seems to be catching on. As a result, this was the dominant rhetorical messaging of the anti-immigration activists who organized the recent protests against housing child refugees in their cities. This metaphor is also being picked up by political representatives like Steve Stockman (R-Texas), Dan Patrick (R-Texas), Steve King (R-Texas), Michele Bachmann (R-Minnesota), Louie Gohmert (R-Texas), and others, even though many of them do not cite or do not know its explicit historical and theoretical reference to barbarism.

Shamefully, by describing our refugees as “dangerous invaders,” we repeat the wrongs committed by Romans against their barbarian refugees. Today, Central American refugees are treated as “floods” and other dangerous waters, just as barbarians were described by Roman historians as “fierce waves” and “storms.” Ancient barbarians were discriminated against because they supposedly carried disease, brought crime, and were not able to learn the dominant language. Today, similar baseless accusations are being made against recent child refugees. Following the projection of a false character onto populations in need of help, we—also like the Romans—exploit that population inexcusably. Today, Central American refugees sleep in “squalid,” “[cattle pen](#)”-like camps and detention centers, just as defenseless Goth refugees taken in by the Romans were treated terribly by Roman standards.

It is true that Rome fell because of an invasion by barbarian refugees, but it was not because they had war as their primary object, as Buchanan wrongly argues. Rather, it was because the barbarian refugees, who entered Roman territory attempting to escape violence at the hands of the Huns, were brutally exploited, forced into military service, and made to suffer horrible living conditions in the Roman refugee camps. The Goths destroyed Rome because of its imperialism and exploitation. If the U.S. is not careful, history may repeat itself.

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