The Syrian Conflict: Two Perspectives on 10,000 Lives

Approximately 470,000 Syrians have been killed as a result of the Syrian civil war which began in March of 2011. Millions have been displaced and are looking to start life anew in countries across the globe. (Barnard) Many countries have been receptive to these millions of Syrians looking for a new place to call home. Turkey and Germany have accepted millions of refugees to date, and more Syrians are applying for refugee status every day (The Washington Post). America’s stance on refugee immigration has been scrutinized by many, and for different reasons. President Barack Obama declared in 2015 that the United States would accept 10,000 refugees before the end of his presidency (Babin), a goal that was reached last September. The Washington Post’s editorial board released an opinion article titled “America has accepted 10,000 Syrian refugees. That’s still too few.” in which they address this cap and why it should be higher. The Washington Post is a historically liberal news outlet, with a widely democratic and liberal minded reader base. The Post’s editorial board consists of eight members who are meant to “represent the views of the Washington Post as an institution.” (The Washington Post) Brian Babin’s “America’s Refugee Program: A Clear and Present Danger,” written for The National Review offers an opposing stance on Obama’s refugee plan. The National Review is a historically conservative platform, and has a mainly republican-conservative readership. Both Babin and The Post agree that there needs to be a change in refugee policy. While Babin uses establishing credibility, emotionally charged claims, and polarizing ideas to tap into his audience’s sense of a greater good, The Post creates an argument based on facts, historical precedent, and use of metaphor in a logical argument to influence the opinions of their readers.

Both Babin and The Post use credibility as a means of persuading their readership. The ways in which each party establishes credibility, however, differ. Babin attempts to establish
credibility in the first paragraph of his article in a straightforward manner. Following a statement claiming that America’s current refugee program is a threat, he says, “Over one year ago, I introduced legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives, H.R. 3314, the Resettlement Accountability National Security Act of 2015, that would suspend the program and stop the president’s reckless plan to bring in tens of thousands of refugees from Syria and other radical Islamic hotspots.” (Babin) Babin immediately identifies himself as a member of the House of Representatives and makes his intentions clear. In doing so, he introduces himself to his readership as someone with relevant knowledge on the subject at hand. He does this because anyone is far more likely to consider the opinions of a politician who directly influences the law in their country. By establishing his credibility early on, Babin sets his audience up to accept the claims he makes later on in his article. *The Post,* unlike Babin, does not make a forward attempt to establish credibility. Rather, it relies on the fact that the editorial board is a collective of members who exchange their thoughts and opinions in order to reach mutual conclusions. This in itself establishes credibility in the eye of the reader because it takes into account the views of many authors, as opposed to one. The reader may assume that the ideas presented in the article are thoroughly debated and thought through by professionals, which in turn eases the reader into accepting the claims they make. Both authors benefit greatly from establishing credibly in the first few paragraphs of their articles. Establishing credibility early on brings the readers mind to a state of accepting information as opposed to questioning it. Now that both authors have introduced themselves as relevant authorities on the topic, they can begin to persuade the audience to accept their ideas. This plays an integral role in the argument that follows by lowering the amount of supporting evidence needed for the audience to accept their claims.
A rhetorical strategy exhibited by both Babin and The Post is the use of bold claims. In both articles, these claims are used to carry the messages the authors wish to convey. Their claims are introduced in a myriad of ways, but ultimately work towards one goal: cementing an idea, and convincing each audience of that idea by connecting with their emotion or reasoning. The ways in which bold claims are used throughout each article are numerous, but largely centralize on the core components of a typical argument involving the Middle East and immigration: fear, sensationalism, and American values. In engineering their claims to appeal to their audiences, Babin and The Post are able to convince the audience of their ideas.

The audience of each piece plays a crucial role in the word choice of the authors. In order to truly persuade an audience, each author must be able to connect to the emotions of the reader in order to influence their opinions. Babin is able to effectively capitalize on his audience’s emotions in order to further his argument, most notably by using sensationalism and fear as a catalyst for persuasion. Readers who fall on the ends of a political spectrum are more likely to get sucked into broad statements that support their own ideas, regardless of supporting evidence. Babin’s arguments are largely centered around the emotionally charged nature of the claims he makes and his statements are deliberately selected to appeal to the ideology of his audience.

Babin’s main opposition towards accepting Syrian Refugees is a fear that the wave of immigrants will be riddled with terrorists. He claims that “the attacks in Paris, Brussels, Nice, Boston, San Bernardino, and Orlando prove that terrorists have infiltrated and exploited the refugee programs of Western Europe and America.” (Babin) Babin associates the wave of refugees with terrorism. He does this to turn his readers away from the idea of accepting refugees by classifying them as a danger to society. By his logic, if America were to accept the Syrian refugees, the country would be doomed to experience a terrorist attack. This sensationalism of
terrorism in the context of Syrian refugees is fueled by the emotions of Babin’s audience. The lasting pain caused to America by acts of terror are very real and bring about strong feelings. Babin does not need to supply evidence for his claim since the audience is already in a receptive mindset. Babin is able to create a link between immigrants and terrorism in the mind of his audience to deter them from supporting refugee resettlement.

Babin makes another bold claim when he states: “Our current program is a Trojan horse allowing ISIS and other terrorist groups an open invitation to immigrate into the U.S. and establish bases of operation legally and at taxpayer expense.” (Babin) In this metaphor, Babin uses fear to further manipulate the emotions of his readership. He not only claims that allowing Syrian refugees into America will cause an inevitable uprising, but it will cost Americans their money. Babin uses this metaphor to push readers away from accepting refugees. Many know the story of the Trojan horse, which was used by the Greeks to sack the city of Troy. The logical accessibility of his metaphor allows a broad range of his readership to connect with it. Babin compares Syrian refugees to a threat ready to sack our country at any time. This persuades the reader in the sense that no one wants to willingly bring terrorists into their country, let alone pay for their transportation. Again, Babin is building a case against refugee resettlement and is using fear to cause separation between the American people and the people fleeing Syria. The audience is pushed to think that the threat of terrorism is imminent and must be avoided, therefore no one should be let in.

While emotionally charged claims are certainly more prevalent in Babin’s piece, The Post uses strong claims to form their core argument: “The modesty of the numerical goal is incommensurate with the weight of the challenge posed by some 5 million Syrian refugees, including roughly 1.1 million already in Europe.” (The Washington Post) In this sentence, The
Post criticizes President Obama’s plan to allow only 10,000 Syrian Refugees into America. The Post claims that Obama’s plan is out of touch with the current state of affairs in Syria, and that accepting only 10,000 refugees is laughable compared to European efforts. This statement serves to set a logical point of reference for the reader and to help them understand the scale of this global issue. This point of reference shifts the perspective of the reader and capitalizes on American inaction in terms of Syrian refugee resettlement. The result is that any new claims made by The Post will be inherently stronger, as they are now supported by the notion that America is doing little to help the dying population of Syria. This statement works well at aligning the audience with the ideas of The Post, as liberal audiences tend to be pro-immigration and pro-diversity. More so, by drawing logical comparisons, The Post causes the reader to rethink American policy and make them want change.

In order to instill the idea of accepting more refugees into the mind of the reader, The Post compares the efforts of America to many different countries in another strong claim: “Measured against resettlement programs on behalf of refugees by Germany, France, Britain and other Western countries, to say nothing of those by Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, America’s own efforts are meager. Canada, with a population barely a tenth the size of the United States’, has resettled three times more Syrian refugees since last fall.” (The Washington Post) In doing so, The Post continues to stress the relative inaction of the United States when it comes to this global crisis. By comparing the United States to other countries, The Post discretely stirs feelings of competition in its audience and questions the values of the American government. Many Americans take pride in their country as a representative of liberty, freedom, and justice. It would come as a shock to any uninformed readers that their country, while based on equality, is doing little to aid people struggling to attain the human rights they’ve always enjoyed. The Post
is deliberate in that it wants readers to feel like America could easily be doing more to help Syrian refugees resettle.

Once The Post identifies America’s inaction regarding refugee resettlement as an issue, they further their claim through the use of a metaphor: “If the United States, a country of 320 million, granted asylum to 65,000 Syrians, it would be statistically akin to adding 6½ people to a baseball stadium holding 32,000.” (The Washington Post) This metaphor holds power because it does a great job of scaling down the situation and making it accessible to the minds of their readership. In a stadium of 32,000, adding six or seven people doesn’t really make that big of a difference. It is far easier to support a cause that resettles refugees and saves lives when there isn’t a large impact on the host community. The use of this metaphor allows the audience to better comprehend the situation and makes them more likely to support The Post’s views. After establishing credibility, setting up their arguments, and appealing to the audience in various ways, both authors use metaphors to direct the conversation towards resolution.

The final rhetorical element used by both Babin and The Post in order to persuade their readership is the use of historical precedent in argument. A point which draws on examples citing refugees of the past was made by The Post: “Previous waves of immigrants and refugees — Irish, Italians, Jews and Vietnamese — have been despised, feared and shunned by some Americans, much as Syrians are being vilified by some Americans now. Yet like their predecessors, Syrians, joining 150,000 of their countrymen already in the United States, will make new and productive lives that ultimately add to America’s unique dynamism” (2). This optimistic view of refugees in general is meant to settle the reader’s mind using an argument based on history. The Post counters the controversy surrounding the immigration of Syrian refugees with the idea that many groups were looked down on in the past, yet ultimately
contributed greatly to America’s cultural diversity. This comparison is meant to sway the reader to think of refugees as a positive force that can add to their country. After instilling the idea that America does not do enough in terms of Syrian refugee resettlement, *The Post* ensures its readers that the immigration of refugees will be beneficial to America as a whole. Babin challenges this idea of historical precedence, saying:

> In our history, thousands of people have found refuge in America and have contributed enormously to its greatness. America has always been a country of immigrants celebrating their individual heritages alongside the ideals of freedom and liberty that bind us together as Americans. But the world has changed, and a refugee policy that casts aside the safety of American citizens must also change. (Babin)

Babin argues that history doesn’t apply in the context of Syrian refugees. He believes the world has changed enough that the safety of the American people would be compromised if Syrian refugees were allowed to immigrate. This quote directly supports his sentiment of alienating the Syrian people from America based on the fear of terrorism. Babin informs his audience that Syrian refugees cannot contribute to the greatness of America; they shouldn’t celebrate their heritage here. In eliminating historical precedence, Babin draws his audience to believe that Syrian refugees are not equivalent to other refugee groups of the past. Instead, Babin suggests that Americans could aid Syrian refugees from afar. He says, “As compassionate Americans, we can help displaced refugees in safe zones near their own homeland. Indeed, for the cost of bringing one refugee into the U.S. on a path to citizenship, we can help many more than that in safe zones.” (Babin) Babin suggests that we could do much more if we aid Syrians from overseas. While this suggestion doesn’t help to solve the issue of refugee overflow in countries
neighboring Syria, it does provide an alternative to those who are against refugee immigration, and would more than likely suit Babin’s audience perfectly.

Both *The Post* and Babin use various rhetorical strategies in order to persuade their audience to think in different ways. *The Post* and Babin each begin their arguments by establishing credibility, but they differ as to how they use that credibility. *The Post* uses credibility to create an argument based on logic by appealing to their audience through comparison, national values, and metaphor to accrue support for their ideas, and then uses historical precedence in order to promote refugee immigration. Babin relies on his credibility as a member of the House to develop an argument based on sensationalism, fear, and emotionally charged claims to stifle immigration and promote aid from afar. Both authors do well in terms of reaching their target audience; the ways in which they develop their arguments shows mastery in appealing to their respective audiences. It must be noted, however, that Babin’s arguments rely on an audience that already agrees with his sentiments, largely due to a lack of supporting evidence for his claims. *The Washington Post*, in contrast, creates an argument based on data and logic, which may yield a broader range of acceptance among a wider, more diverse audience.
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