

Ashcroft Heeded Our Cry for Help
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Opponents of President George W. Bush's nominee for attorney general, former senator John Ashcroft, portray him as a man incapable of representing all Americans, particularly minorities and the oppressed. But I and many thousands of Vietnamese Americans know that among Ashcroft's principles is a deep compassion for the plight of the most helpless of the downtrodden.

In 1978 my family along with 85 of our countrymen climbed into a small, leaky fishing vessel and became boat people in search of freedom from communist oppression. After 12 days at sea -- many without food, fuel or water -- we saw salvation in a glimpse of the shores of Malaysia. Our jubilation turned to alarm, however, when a patrol boat ignored our SOS flag and fired warning bullets, forcing us back to sea. Although we were able to land at a deserted beach under cover of night, and ultimately ended up in the United States, gone were any illusions that the Western promise of freedom and opportunity would be readily delivered.

By the early 1990s, when my oldest sister escaped from Vietnam to a Hong Kong refugee camp, I knew that my experience in Malaysia was not an isolated incident of cruelty but international policy. Thailand closed its harbors. Malaysia refused to allow refugees to land. And Hong Kong began to send the refugees back to Vietnam, where they faced the prospect of further persecution. Even Vietnam did not want the refugees back; Hanoi demanded payment from the international community for each repatriation.

In 1995 Ashcroft's key support in Congress helped pass a measure to stop forced repatriation until asylum claims could be reviewed by U.S. officials. President Clinton, however, vetoed that legislation. Despite the setback, congressional pressure prompted the State Department to establish a program to review the asylum claims of some 20,000 boat people after their return to Vietnam. Ninety percent were found to be refugees and resettled in the United States.

Thanks to the compassion of America, my family is now safe, protected by the blue covers of U.S. passports. Thanks to the leadership of Ashcroft, more than 18,000 other victims of persecution have hopes of the same security. Ashcroft heeded their cry for help without regard for political advantage because there is little gain in standing up for helpless foreigners.

Such compassion and commitment to justice are why the Boat People S.O.S. Committee, the Association of Former Vietnamese Political Prisoners and Vietnamese community groups across the country support Ashcroft. In the words of one community leader and activist, he "showed the most commendable commitment to justice without regard to race, religion, nationality or political opinion. This unconditional commitment to justice has saved tens of thousands of lives halfway around the world."

This example of Ashcroft's compassion and courage shows not only that he is qualified to be attorney general of the United States, but that he would be an attorney general for all Americans.