Opinion
Guest Voices



Children play at a park in the predominantly Somali neighborhood of Cedar-Riverside in Minneapolis on May 12, 2022. (AP/Jessie Wardarski)



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Minneapolis — December 9, 2025
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When Donald Trump, speaking at a Cabinet meeting Tuesday (Dec. 2) at the White House, used the word "garbage" while discussing America's Somalis, he wasn't dismissing a policy concern about the immigrant community or talking about an incident that he objected to. He was speaking about people — and not any people, but a group known for resilience, faith and service to others. The Somalis, refugees from East Africa, have overcome much to make their own contribution to the civic fabric of the United States.

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The attack was disgraceful, but not new. Somalis have long lived at the intersection of anti-Black racism and anti-Muslim bigotry, where they are an easy target for the most dehumanizing political rhetoric. When, in his first term as president, Trump disparaged African nations as "s–thole countries," it was dismissed as crude language from a crude man. But language is never simply language. Words like these are invitations to treat people as expendable, unwelcome or unworthy of human regard.

The Somali community in the U.S. bears little resemblance to the one painted by these slurs. Arriving as refugees fleeing war, Somalis have become one of the most civically engaged and socially productive Muslim communities in the country. Minnesota, home to the largest Somali population, consistently reports high levels of community participation and entrepreneurship. Somali Minnesotans generate some $500 million in income annually and pay close to $67 million in state and local taxes every year, with an estimated $8 billion overall impact on the state's economy.

These are not small numbers. They are the footprint of a hardworking community that has transformed vacant commercial corridors in major U.S. cities into thriving markets, restaurants and neighborhood hubs. Somali American truck drivers keep supply chains moving, Somali physicians and nurses and home health aides support our health care system, teachers shape future generations. Somali entrepreneurs create jobs. Somali academics pursue their research in America's universities and teach in our public and private schools.

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Like many other immigrant groups in American history, Somalis face real challenges. Refugee communities often arrive with significant trauma, limited English proficiency and spare financial resources. Poverty rates are higher, as they have been for every displaced population that arrived without the benefit of generational wealth. Some young people, navigating complex pressures, fall into crime. None of this is surprising or takes away from the overall contribution of the Somali community.

Like American Muslims more broadly, Somalis are often expected to be extraordinary just to be treated as ordinary, to be given a chance. Their two identities, Black and Muslim, lead them to be stereotyped and demonized, and disparaging them is an easy way to score cheap political points.

The real danger of a public figure — especially the president, of all people — calling human beings "garbage" is that it grants permission for a society to see them that way — indeed, trains society to do so. That's how the seeds for hate crimes are planted. How discriminatory policies gain traction and tacit support from the mob. It's how the dehumanization cycle works.

Having survived civil war, famine and displacement, thousands of Somalis are raising children born in this country who still feel the shadow of the previous generations' trauma. They should not have to endure political dehumanization in the country they now call, and contribute to as, home. This country is blessed with Somalis who have come, like generations of immigrants before them, to build dreams for those who will follow. Treasure them. Our Somali neighbors are a gift, not garbage.