

What a Difference a Day Makes:
Changes in Refugee Policy after the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975

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On April 30, 1975, after a long and protracted struggle, the North Vietnamese Army finally captured the capital of South Vietnam. In the weeks preceding that fateful day, with the promise of resettlement in the United States, elite and well-placed South Vietnamese began their exodus from Saigon. These initial 130,000 refugees were processed through reception centers established on Wake Island or Guam and then flown to four camps in the United States. Here in the U.S. camps, the refugees were given up to six months of education and cultural training to facilitate their assimilation into their new society. It was believed that when their resettlement was complete, as it was by the end of 1975, U.S. responsibility for training and resettling Vietnamese refugees would be over.¹

Nonetheless, the exodus did not end on April 30, 1975. By December, when the U.S. camps closed, the number of Indochinese refugees being held in camps on the coast of Thailand and along the Thai border with Laos and Cambodia had reached at least 70,000.² Despite herculean efforts by voluntary agencies (VOLAGS) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to manage and facilitate the resettlement of these refugees, the numbers swelled rapidly. By the end of 1979, there were about 143,000 land refugees and over 75,000 boat refugees in squalid overcrowded camps throughout Southeast Asia. Before all camps were finally closed in the mid 1990s, 1.4 million Indochinese fleeing war, famine and oppression had been resettled in the United States, a figure which represents only half of the estimated 2 to 3 million who left Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia from 1975 through 1998.³

The resettlement of the Indochinese refugees represents the largest refugee program ever undertaken by the United States.⁴ By all accounts, it is considered a success. Nevertheless, from December 1975, when U.S. camps closed, until 1980, no formal U.S. sponsored programs were available to help acculturate the refugees held in Asian camps. Refugees accepted into the United States during that time were expected to avail themselves of English classes taught by various benevolent organizations and the adult education programs which sprung up in resettlement areas. Children were expected to become acculturated through immersion in the local schools. Finally, major changes in refugee policy began when the Senate passed an amendment to the Health, Education and Welfare appropriations bill on July 19, 1979, to assist in the education of the Indochinese refugees, and the Refugee Act of 1980 which totally revamped official U.S. policy towards refugees.

My paper is not by any means meant to be an exhaustive research paper on U.S. refugee policy over the last 40 years. Policies and programs vary and diverge to such a degree that conclusive coverage would simply not be possible in such a limited space. Instead, my paper examines a small part of what the Indochinese refugees faced in processing camps, both in the United States and in Asia, and more importantly, what was expected of them by their benevolent hosts once they were resettled; that was, to become one of us, to become Americanized, and to do it quickly, with as little impact as possible on our economic system, our neighborhoods and our schools.

It goes without saying that the Vietnamese evacuation and resettlement were not without controversy. One must recall that 1975 was a tumultuous year. The refugees landed in the United States at a time of great political upheaval and unrest. The Vietnam War may have ended, but there was little sympathy for the government which had allowed it to drag on for so long. "Many Americans felt a desperate need to salvage something."⁵ The contingent of 130,000 refugees was the golden fleece. The U.S. camps were designed to accept them,

acculturate them, and then “spread them like a thin layer of butter throughout the country so they’d disappear.”⁶

Every effort was made to resettle the first refugees across the United States in very small groups, usually no more than two or three families. Ideally they were settled in areas that were economically stable and where the refugees would have at least some opportunities to find work. In addition, it was hoped that local schools could absorb the small number of children without requiring large amounts of federal aid. For example, “75 percent of the school districts...[had] fewer than 20 refugees enrolled in the district scattered among several schools. About 85 percent of the schools enrolling [refugee] children [had] fewer than ten in each school.”⁷

After the U.S. camps closed, public information about the ordeal of Indochinese refugees and about refugee camp conditions in Asia was scarce – not surprising, since refugees in Asian camps were kept under tight state control and in most instances away from UNHCR inspectors. No journalists were ever allowed in or near most beach camps. It is no accident that there was little information given to the public about camp conditions. The governments in the countries of first asylum were very cautious about letting social scientists or journalists into their camps to prevent criticism of the way camps were run.⁸ It may not have mattered in the long run, however – there was very little interest in what was happening to Vietnamese refugees in Asian camps. No one in the United States wanted to dwell on issues related to the Vietnam War.⁹

By 1977, many of the refugee families already settled in the United States were finding it too difficult to be separated from their large extended families and had begun to move out of U.S. designated resettlement areas to areas where a Vietnamese community was already established. As a result, the refugees were suddenly no longer invisible. Their mere presence in larger and larger numbers in fewer but more densely populated communities was causing unanticipated problems in the United States, and more information about these problems was reaching the public. The increasing visibility was playing into the hands of those who thought bringing in the refugees was a bad idea from the start. The public was becoming increasingly unwilling to countenance the idea of more refugees being allowed to emigrate to the United States.

But thousands upon thousands of refugees were waiting desperately in Asian camps. The situation had long since passed crisis proportions. By January of 1980, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) reported that “[n]egative public opinion is increasing significantly, [and] given existing programs and resources, we can expect continued tension.... This is becoming an intensely emotional issue.”¹⁰ Although the idea of opening new camps in the United States was never acted on, there was serious discussion on the matter. Everything was on the table as government agencies and advisors tried to get their arms around a refugee policy that would benefit the refugees but not bankrupt the U.S. economy. HEW finally realized that “the ability of the local economy to absorb significant numbers of new refugees [had not been] thoughtfully considered in resettlement.” A great many difficulties could be traced back to the inadequacy of acculturation and language programs offered in the 1975 camps, as well as the non-existence of such training in the Asian camps.¹¹ For example, six months – the outright maximum any U.S. camp operated – was simply not enough time to prepare the refugees for resettlement in any new area, let alone the United States where conditions were polar opposites of those in Southeast Asia. In addition, although it is “generally assumed that learning English would

assist in the adjustment process of resettlement,” studies have shown that attendance in English classes actually increases stress for Indochinese refugees rather than decreasing it.¹²

But major changes were in the offing. After prolonged debate, the U.S. government agreed in mid-1979 to assist in the opening and operating of five new processing camps in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand.¹³ Once refugees accepted offers of resettlement, they were moved to these processing centers. This time, unlike in 1975, there were far fewer unrealistic expectations of the job to be done. Where the first camps were run with the intention of a two- to eight-week turnover, the new centers prepared for a minimum of two- to four-month orientation courses with the possibility to extend classes over the course of one to three years.¹⁴ It was hoped that the extended language and orientation programs would eliminate many of the problems the refugees faced when resettled in unfamiliar communities in the United States. These new programs and new policies seemed light years beyond anything envisioned on that morning in 1975 when the first group of refugees landed in California. Clearly the United States government learned something crucial about the importance of providing thoughtful and thorough language training as it worked to reform refugee policy.

Although Southeast Asian refugee camps existed through the 1990s, they were gradually and consistently emptied and closed. Refugees, however, still abound throughout Africa, the Middle East and even in our own hemisphere in Central and South America. The U.S. camps, which closed in 1975, did not conclude an exodus, and the camps that closed in the 1990s did not conclude a process. Refugees, though not previously understood and universally recognized, had always presented a dilemma for sovereign states. No doubt this will continue for many years to come. What has changed, of course, is U.S. policy towards the needs of refugees.

In 1975, the new Vietnamese refugees were expected to leave the camps as a group that would easily assimilate into the immigrant norms of the western refugees who had come before them. Resources to accomplish their transition were deemed to be reasonable and finite. At the start of the evacuation, Congress appropriated \$455 million dollars to assist in the Indochinese resettlement, but by the end of “fiscal year 1979, [the amount] made available by Congress...to help the refugees” had already exceeded \$1 billion dollars,¹⁴ with no end in sight. As seems fitting, no estimated final figure of the cost associated with educating, acculturating and resettling Indochinese refugees is possible to calculate. No less daunting were the resources needed to assist the refugees in healing the psychological distress that resulted from their traumatic transition. Those who have worked with the refugees during resettlement comment on their “remarkable inner strength...despite their war and Asian camp experiences. Overall, their resiliency is...startling....”¹⁵ When one considers what was expected of the refugees, certainly any measure of success they demonstrated in their new lives in the United States is not only commendable, it is astounding.

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The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington, D.C. was one of the organizations contracted by HEW to provide teachers and materials to the camps in Southeast Asia after 1979. All of the training materials cited in this article can be found in their library, along with Dick Clark's congressional testimony and many of the reports and papers such as those written by HEW, Dept. of State, the Ford Foundation and the Indochina Refugee Action Center which are mentioned and cited herein.

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Note: Precise numbers of camps and of refugees vary from source to source. I have made an attempt to synthesize them as closely as possible throughout the paper. See also GAO, IRAC, IATF, and State Dept. reports, Congressional histories, Clark testimony, Grant, Robinson, Tolefson.
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