

## “Hiding Behind the Humanitarian Label”: Refugees, Repatriates, and the Rebuilding of America’s Benevolent Image After the Vietnam War\*

They wanted a ship, and they wanted to go home. Some among them had burned a U.S. Navy barracks to the ground at Camp Asan, a temporary shelter for Vietnamese refugees on Guam, and others were threatening to burn themselves on the front lawn of the Interagency Task Force (IATF), the government body responsible for refugee resettlement. Still others were planning a hunger strike if U.S. authorities would not help Vietnamese refugees seeking repatriation return to Vietnam. The repatriates demanded that a Vietnamese merchant ship, the *Thuong Tin I*, docked at Guam, be turned over to them to facilitate the journey. All the while, American officials spent the summer and early fall of 1975 trying to avoid a public relations crisis while figuring out the best course of action for the repatriates. Approximately 1,600 Vietnamese evacuees sought repatriation in the six months after the fall of Saigon. The largest repatriation movement organized on Guam, and most of the few repatriates in stateside refugee camps were eventually transferred to Guam to await their chance to return home.

As the repatriates issued their demands, Pentagon officials began receiving transcripts of Vietnamese news articles and broadcasts, as well as reports from international news agencies such as United Press International (UPI), Associated Press, and Reuters, in which Vietnamese authorities accused the United States of frightening thousands of Vietnamese into fleeing their home country. Although the collapse of the Saigon regime on April 30, 1975, had ended the fighting, Vietnam technically remained two countries with two governments: Hanoi in the north, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in Saigon in the south. Vietnam would be officially reunified on July 2, 1976. In newspaper reports and radio broadcasts, Hanoi and the PRG accused the United States of “fabricating the myth about a blood bath and hiding behind the humanitarian label” as American helicopters, airplanes, and ships transported Vietnamese evacuees to Guam and other islands in the South Pacific before

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moving them to refugee camps in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Statements criticizing the repatriation effort also pointed to a United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) rule requiring refugees to apply for repatriation through the UN, which then would petition to obtain permission for repatriation from the home nation. By that statute, wire reports from Hanoi and the PRG argued, the appearance of unauthorized repatriates on Vietnam's shores would constitute a violation of Vietnamese sovereignty, the true motive that the United States had cloaked in humanitarian concern.<sup>2</sup>

The "humanitarian label" is at the heart of this article, which argues that as the United States attempted to salvage its image as a benevolent nation in the wake of the Vietnam War, the repatriation movement on Guam challenged the notion that the evacuation of Vietnamese was a necessary rescue operation motivated by humanitarian concern. Via wire reports and communiqués, the Vietnamese government accused the United States of fabricating a humanitarian emergency in order to continue meddling in Vietnam's affairs. In the broader picture of U.S. foreign relations, the repatriate issue threatened to undermine America's efforts to rehabilitate its image of itself as a benevolent power at a time when the United States had lost credibility due to misguided policy decisions, atrocities committed by American troops during the Vietnam War, and the postwar embargo. Images of Americans embracing Vietnamese refugees served as a form of damage control as the United States sought to reclaim its moral authority.

As it became clear in the spring of 1975 that the U.S.-backed government in Saigon was on the verge of collapse, President Gerald Ford asked Congress to approve a humanitarian aid package for Vietnamese refugees, arguing that the United States had a long-standing reputation for assisting the oppressed and the less fortunate. By focusing on refugees and America's ability to help them, Ford emphasized the impression of the United States as both strong and benevolent, an image that the United States had been crafting since before World War II. U.S. actions in Vietnam shattered that image, and the Ford administration's imposing of decidedly malevolent economic sanctions on the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam like those that had been applied to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam during the war did not help attempts to reestablish it.<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing the humanitarian nature of refugee assistance also made it apolitical—despite the politics of the Vietnam War and its end, what the United States was doing now was simply helping those in need. However, that some refugees, even a small fraction of those who arrived on U.S. shores, wanted to

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1. All Vietnamese statements in this article come from English-language sources. Telegram 142320Z from Senior Civil Coordinators from IATF, Department of the Army, October 1975, box 16, folder "Operations New Life/New Arrivals Message Traffic for Repatriate Situation on Guam," (hereafter folder "Operation New Life"), Entry # A1-1680, Record Group 319 (hereafter RG 319), National Archives (hereafter NARA).

2. Telegram No. 172332Z from Taft to Hoover, October 1975, *Ibid.*

3. Edwin A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000* (Amherst, MA, 2007), 13.

return home challenged the notion that the United States was saving endangered Vietnamese from a communist menace. International media covered the repatriation movement, and communiqués from the governments in Hanoi and Saigon argued that humanitarianism was a sham for continued U.S. involvement in Vietnamese affairs. In the wake of the Vietnam War, it was difficult for the United States to prove that it deserved the "humanitarian label."

Caught in the tension between the United States and Vietnam, repatriates were what Caroline Kieu Linh Valverde calls "transnational subjects," attempting to move across borders, shaping the diplomatic engagement of two nations.<sup>4</sup> So powerful was the rescue narrative that it led scholars of Vietnamese refugee resettlement to view the exiles as "object of rescue" just as U.S. policy makers had in 1975, Yen Le Espiritu has observed.<sup>5</sup> The repatriation movement challenges that trend in the historiography, revealing the ambivalence of some Vietnamese toward their exile status and the desire to return among others. Repatriates do not fit neatly in American narratives about the dangers of postwar Vietnam, the prospect for a better life in the United States, and the strong but benevolent power of America's paternalistic muscle. Numbering less than 1,600 of the 130,000 Vietnamese exiles brought to the United States via Operation New Life and New Arrivals in 1975, the repatriates do not represent a majority opinion about resettlement, but their voices mattered to U.S. policy makers trying to manage America's image after the Vietnam War. Upholding the image of benevolence was hard work.

#### HUMANITARIANISM AND AMERICA'S "BENEVOLENT SUPREMACY"

The practices of humanitarianism and human rights advocacy have had various meanings and uses depending on the era and whether the practitioners were states or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Tracing its roots to the mid-nineteenth century and the founding of the International Committee for the Red Cross, humanitarianism as practiced by NGOs traditionally has focused on protecting civilians during wartime. Human rights, by contrast, is a much more recent concept, codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and made a focus of U.S. foreign policy by President Jimmy Carter.<sup>6</sup> Bronwyn Leebaw explains that humanitarian activists have typically seen themselves as apolitical, whereas human rights movements advocate for political changes to stop oppression, violence, and other abuses. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, some humanitarian groups began to seek ways in which their aid

4. Caroline Kieu Linh Valverde, "Making Transnational Viet Nam: Vietnamese American Community—Viet Nam Linkages Through Money, Music and Modems" (PhD diss., University of California-Berkeley, 2002), 54.

5. Yen Le Espiritu, "Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (2006): 410.

6. David F. Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships* (New York, 2006), 143–93. See also Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration* (DeKalb, IL, 2008), 13–16.

might be linked to political and military efforts to end violence.<sup>7</sup> Michael Barnett argues that during the Cold War, humanitarianism became an instrument of foreign policy, which required aid agencies to figure out how to operate within the complicated political milieu of the Cold War world without being seen as advancing any particular diplomatic agenda.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the historical intention of humanitarianism to be apolitical, the U.S. government during the Cold War used development aid as part of an overarching foreign policy aimed at staunching the spread of communism. The link between U.S. Cold War foreign policy and humanitarian aid began with the Foreign Assistance Act of 1948, which authorized the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe after World War II. Initiatives throughout the fifties included food assistance as well as economic reconstruction and other forms of aid. In 1961, the Foreign Assistance Act established the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in order to separate military aid from development assistance and other forms of civilian aid.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have pointed out that U.S. humanitarian efforts have been motivated, at least in part, by the desire to appear to be a “good citizen” which promotes democracy and opposes oppression throughout the world. While some Americans undoubtedly saw this as a reason for U.S. foreign relations, the image was used to justify foreign interventions that had more to do with global power relations than with actual need.<sup>10</sup>

There were moments during the Cold War in which U.S. agencies created the image of a humanitarian emergency to validate policy initiatives. In Vietnam, Catholic Relief Services collaborated with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the U.S. Navy to facilitate Operation Passage to Freedom, the migration of approximately one million Catholics from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) to southern Vietnam. The CIA had launched a successful propaganda campaign that convinced Vietnamese Catholics that they would be persecuted by Hanoi’s communist government, and the exodus was the largest civilian evacuation in history up to that point.<sup>11</sup> As the Vietnam War dragged on, the United States came to be seen more and more as the cause of a humanitarian emergency rather than the solution.<sup>12</sup> Critics would later accuse Ambassador Graham Martin, the last U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam, of

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7. Bronwyn Leebaw, “The Politics of Impartial Activism: Humanitarianism and Human Rights *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 2 (2007): 223–38.

8. Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY, 2013), 132. See also, *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (Ithaca, NY, 2008); Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield, eds., *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics* (Santa Fe, NM, 2011).

9. Abby Stoddard, “Trends in U.S. Humanitarian Policy,” *The New Humanitarians: A Review of Trends in Global Humanitarian Action*, ed. Joanna Macrae, HPG Report 11 (April 2002), 39–49.

10. Alynna Lyon and Chris Dolan, “American Humanitarian Intervention: Toward a Theory of Coevolution,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3 (2007): 53.

11. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 147. See also, Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC, 2004), 129–43.

12. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 148.

exaggerating the potential for a "bloodbath" to justify evacuating Vietnamese citizens from Saigon in 1975.<sup>13</sup>

Nhi T. Lieu observes that as the refugee crisis developed in Vietnam leading up to the fall of Saigon, President Ford appealed to the notion of an American humanitarian tradition that had motivated U.S. Cold War foreign policies. Speaking of America's "humanitarian record," Ford sought to gain support for federal spending on refugee resettlement and counter the racism that tinged U.S. public responses to Vietnamese refugees, Lieu argues.<sup>14</sup> Granting asylum to Vietnamese refugees also allowed U.S. policy makers to cast the new government in Saigon as an oppressive entity that might imprison, torture, and execute those who had collaborated with the United States during the war.<sup>15</sup> Similar to the 1954 southward migration of Vietnamese Catholics from the northern part of Vietnam, the manufacturing of fear and the call for humanitarian rescue aimed to validate U.S. policy making and actions in Vietnam. Rather than being separate from the politics of the Cold War, humanitarian responsibility was the stated purpose of U.S. foreign interventions, and Ford employed that ideology regarding Vietnamese refugee resettlement even though the outcomes of the Vietnam War illustrated the destruction U.S. intervention caused.

For the world to view the United States as a destructive force in the world would delegitimize the national image of the United States as a benevolent power that American policy makers had been trying to craft since before the Cold War began. Justin Hart illustrates how the State Department in the thirties began launching initiatives to "project America" to the world.<sup>16</sup> As the United States engaged with the decolonizing world after World War II, the image its policy makers projected to its potential allies, Melani McAlister writes, was one of "benevolent supremacy": "global in its scope, benevolent in its intent, benign in its effect."<sup>17</sup> These were ideas that U.S. policy makers had to sell not only to the world but to Americans as well, especially when time to deploy troops in the name of U.S. interests came, as Susan Brewer has demonstrated.<sup>18</sup> When the United States intervened in Vietnam, it characterized its involvement as motivated by a desire to protect the Republic of Vietnam from a communist takeover and support a new democracy as it got its

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13. The Vietnam-Cambodia Emergency, 1975, Part III – Vietnam Evacuation: Testimony of Ambassador Graham A. Martin, Hearing Before the Special Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, Ninety-Fourth Congress, January 27, 1976, Washington, DC, 29.

14. Nhi T. Lieu, *The American Dream in Vietnamese* (Minneapolis, 2011), 10–11.

15. Daniel L. Swanick, "Foreign Policy and Humanitarianism in U.S. Asylum Adjudication: Revisiting the Debate in the Wake of the War on Terror," *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 21 (2007): 129–30.

16. Justin Hart, *Empire of Ideas: The Origins of Public Diplomacy and the Transformation of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, 2013), 4.

17. Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), 46.

18. Susan A. Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (New York, 2009), 3–13.

postcolonial bearings. Using the gendered language of paternalism, which, Barnett argues, remained a primary characteristic of humanitarian intervention even though World War II rendered the language of civilizing missions unacceptable, Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, as well as U.S. troops on the ground, cast the American mission in terms of benevolent guidance.<sup>19</sup>

In Vietnam, the U.S. military attempted to implement the hearts and minds side of U.S. policy by sending army troops and marines into villages to build schools, administer vaccinations, deliver gifts to orphans, and perform other acts of good will. Reporting on the humanitarian work of U.S. military personnel, the MACV *Observer*, the official newspaper of U.S. military operations in Vietnam, called American soldiers “gentle warriors,” kindhearted father figures as well as highly skilled fighters. Photographs of U.S. servicemen playing with children, reassuring worried parents, and cradling infants in their arms accompanied the articles about the humanitarian efforts, but they reflected a central contradiction in the U.S. mission. Orphans, demolished infrastructure, and scorched farmland existed because of the conflict in which the United States played a significant part, and neither individual desire to help on the part of troops nor policy makers’ belief in American benevolence could mitigate the war’s devastating consequences.<sup>20</sup> When Saigon collapsed in 1975, the Ford administration used refugee resettlement as a way to maintain America’s benevolent image, but challenges to its definition of “humanitarian” revealed the fragility of the image.

Historians have illustrated that Americans’ attempts to shape the memory of the war translated into policy making that sought to depict the United States as a savior of the Vietnamese from something evil or abusive. Long after the first Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States, American veterans of the Vietnam War embodied the image of the United States as a savior of the Vietnamese from communism, Christina Schwenkel argues in her analysis of veterans who have returned to Vietnam to do humanitarian work. Schwenkel asserts that “paternalistic convictions and desires to rescue Vietnamese from the poverty of communism with capitalist development” constituted a form a remasculinization by which “images of renewal and regeneration thus come to replace memories of death and devastation.” Continuing an ideological process of portraying the United States as a benevolent interventionist, “the Vietnam veteran reclaims his place as the paternal protector of the Vietnamese nation.”<sup>21</sup> Schwenkel goes on to explain that the discourse of U.S. benevolent intervention relied not only on the purposeful creation and maintenance of a memory of American humanitarian aid to the Vietnamese but also a silencing of Vietnamese voices on the subject.<sup>22</sup>

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19. Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (New York, 2011), 142–82.

20. Ibid.

21. Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington, IN, 2009), 28–34.

22. Ibid., 37.

Controlling the memory of the Vietnam War was part of a larger "neocolonial global order" in which, Edwin Martini contends, the United States "continued to wage economic, political, and cultural war on Vietnam long after 1975."<sup>23</sup> It was from that perspective that Hanoi and the PRG responded to the repatriation issue, viewing it as an American assault on Vietnamese sovereignty, a continuation of the postcolonial struggle Vietnam had waged for three decades. International wire services and the U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service transmitted broadcasts and writings regarding repatriates from the PRG Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Hanoi and Saigon media outlets. Statements accused the United States of "slandering the PRG RSV (Provisional Revolutionary Government Republic of South Vietnam) policies and at the same time serving the long term plot against the Vietnamese people."<sup>24</sup> These communiqués expressed the opinion that sending back refugees without Vietnam's consent was an extension of U.S. attempts to block Vietnamese independence, especially because some officials believed that a ship of refugees returning from a U.S. territory undoubtedly would include spies.<sup>25</sup> There may have been some reality to that suspicion; the *Denver Post* reported in September 1975 that the CIA was recruiting potential informants and agents from the group desiring repatriation. Citing anonymous "refugee sources," a reporter described recruitment efforts aimed at former ARVN servicemen in their thirties and forties.<sup>26</sup>

The United States waged the economic war that Martini describes in part via an embargo that hindered efforts by private organizations to send humanitarian aid to Vietnam. At issue were the definitions of "humanitarian" versus "economic" aid, the latter of which was forbidden under the embargo. According to the terms of the embargo, private organizations seeking to send aid to Vietnam had to apply for a license from the Treasury Department, which would determine whether the type of aid intended to be sent was allowed. Decisions were made on a case-by-case basis, and some humanitarian organizations accused the department of using arbitrary criteria to determine the difference between acceptable and prohibited aid. Embedded in the decisions about what constituted humanitarian aid were ideas about the relationship between the United States and Vietnam. The Vietnamese brought to the United States via refugee resettlement were cast as being endangered by the new government of Vietnam and thus in need of rescue and worthy of aid. Those in Vietnam who might be hungry, sick, or in need of the type of development assistance that had been central to the U.S. mission in Vietnam for a decade were viewed suspiciously. In November 1975, representatives of Clergy and Laity Concerned, the U.S. Catholic Conference, the

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23. Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 2.

24. Telegram 110127Z from IATF to Senior Civil Coordinators, Department of the Army, October 1975, RG 319.

25. Telegram from IATF Fort Chafee to IAFST Secretary of State, folder "Operation New Life," RG 319.

26. Glenn Troelstrup, "CIA 'Recruits' Viet Refugees," *Denver Post*, September 23, 1975.



United Methodist Church, and the United Presbyterian Church testified before the House Subcommittee on International Trade and Commerce regarding the potential for aid to Vietnam to serve the cause of reconciliation.<sup>27</sup> The unclear definition of “humanitarian” and the embargo against Vietnam underscored the limits of American benevolence.

#### REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT AND THE MORAL POLITICS OF REDEMPTION

As Americans evacuated Saigon and surrounding areas in April 1975, a refugee crisis developed as Vietnamese, especially Republic of Vietnam government and military personnel and those who had worked for the U.S. government, the military, and private organizations and businesses, sought to escape the country. In response, President Gerald Ford made a series of overtures to Congress and public speeches imploring lawmakers and citizens to consider the plight of Vietnamese refugees and extend resettlement assistance to them, both monetary and other types of support. In those requests, Ford declared that the United States had a “profound moral obligation” to protect “South Vietnamese intellectuals, professors, teachers, editors, and opinion leaders” who could be targets for persecution by the new Vietnamese government.<sup>28</sup> He also emphasized the idea that benevolence has always motivated U.S. intervention in the world and that the United States has “always been a humanitarian nation.”<sup>29</sup> By focusing on Vietnamese refugees, Ford attempted to reinforce the notion that the United States was a powerful savior, not a defeated nation that had abandoned its ally. “It cannot be in our interest to cause our friends all over the world to wonder whether we will support them,” Ford told Congress in one of his requests for refugee aid.<sup>30</sup>

Despite early resistance to any additional assistance for Vietnam, some lawmakers spoke in agreement with Ford on the refugee issue. As Carl Bon Tempo and Tuyen Ngoc Tran note, both President Ford and Senator Ted Kennedy, one of the leading advocates for U.S. assistance to Vietnamese refugees, depicted the Vietnamese as victims and described America’s responsibility to them as a “moral” obligation. For Kennedy, this calling was distinct from the military alliance between U.S. forces and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and he argued that “our only true remaining moral obligations are with the people, to

27. U.S. Trade Embargo of Vietnam: Church Views, Hearing Before the Subcommittee of International Trade and Commerce of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, Ninety-Fourth Congress, November 17, 1975, Washington, DC.

28. Tuyen Ngoc Tran, “Behind the Smoke and Mirrors: The Vietnamese in California, 1975-1994” (PhD diss., University of California-Berkeley, 2007), 51.

29. Press Conference No. 13 of the President of the United States, May 6, 1975, Washington, DC, 3, folder 14, box 26, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02 – Military Operations, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

30. Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington, KY, 2005), 293-94.



the millions of people in Indochina who cry for help."<sup>31</sup> Days after the fall of Saigon, Senator Jacob Javits, a New York Republican and member of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator Claiborne Pell, a Democrat representing Rhode Island, introduced legislation to provide food, shelter, health care, and education for Vietnamese refugees. Javits's sympathy for the exiles stemmed from his background as the son of immigrants, and Pell had helped resettle Hungarian refugees in the fifties when he was vice president of the International Rescue Committee.<sup>32</sup> In the House of Representatives, New York Democrat Stephen Solarz, a member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, supported the deployment of U.S. troops to rescue Vietnamese fleeing Saigon. Solarz later went on to be an advocate for Cambodian refugees after he visited Thailand and learned of Khmer Rouge atrocities. As chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs in the late seventies, Solarz turned his attention to Vietnamese "boat people" journeying to the United States.<sup>33</sup>

Despite Ford's contention that Americans had a moral responsibility to Vietnamese refugees, public support for his programs initially was minimal. Only 36 percent of Americans surveyed in a national poll approved of Ford's programs. Ford himself recognized that the American public would not necessarily welcome Indochinese refugees with open arms. Rising unemployment caused some Americans to fear that refugees would become competition for jobs, and others saw the Vietnamese as a painful reminder of a disastrous war. West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd argued that "barmaids, prostitutes, and criminals" should be barred from entering the United States.<sup>34</sup> However, to those legislators who opposed aid for refugee resettlement, Ford expressed his anger. He argued that resettling Vietnamese exiles in the United States was "morally right," and he found it "shocking and amazing" that there would be criticism of his refugee program. "It just burns me up, these great humanitarians," Ford said. "Now, damn it, they just turn their backs." He went on to compare the Vietnamese situation to earlier

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31. Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees During the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ, 2008), 147. On Vietnamese refugees, see also Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* (Berkeley, CA, 2006); Sucheng Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia, 2006); Gail Paradise Kelly, *From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States* (Boulder, CO, 1977); Andrew Lam, *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Berkeley, CA, 2005); W. Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response* (London, 1998); Paul Strand and Woodrow Jones, Jr., *Indochinese Refugees in America: Problems of Adaptation and Assimilation* (Durham, NC, 1985); Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1982* (New York, 2010).

32. "Vietnamese Refugee Aid Sought," *Reading Eagle*, May 4, 1975, 2.

33. "Interview with Congressman Stephen Solarz," interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy, the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, November 18, 1996, available at <http://international.loc.gov/service/mss/mssmisc/mfdip/2005%20txt%20files/2004solar.txt>

34. Quang X. Pham, "The Orange Grove: Vietnamese Refugees had Friend in Ford," Jan. 2, 2007, available at [http://www.ocregister.com/ocregister/opinion/abox/article\\_1403442.php](http://www.ocregister.com/ocregister/opinion/abox/article_1403442.php).

Cold War refugee issues. "We didn't do it with the Hungarians, we didn't do it with the Cubans and damn it, we're not going to do it now," Ford said, asserting his commitment to supporting Vietnamese refugees.<sup>35</sup>

In May 1975, Ford signed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, which granted special entry status to approximately 130,000 Vietnamese refugees related to or affiliated with Americans and allocated \$455 million to resettle and provide them with food, medical care, and job counseling.<sup>36</sup> The Act also authorized the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare reimbursed states for costs related to refugee resettlement and made elderly and infirm refugees eligible for Social Security.<sup>37</sup> With refugee camps established on stateside military posts, U.S. Army personnel and Marines assumed the role of caregiver to the new arrivals in a mission called Operation New Life and New Arrivals. Taken at face value, Ford's commitment to refugee resettlement appeared to be a gesture of benevolence meant to perpetuate the notion that humanitarian concern motivated U.S. intervention in the world. The Congressional resolution that appropriated fund to refugee resettlement stated that it was "a necessary step in healing the wounds of the Vietnam War. It was a step consistent with our tradition of providing refuge for the homeless, and help for the helpless. It was a step motivated by compassion and a step motivated by gallant allies." Other problems seemed more pressing—the economy, unemployment, energy, the Middle East—"but in a very real sense, our attitude toward those 150,000 people will be a measure, and will be seen around the world as a measure, of the vitality of our basic American beliefs. The tragedy of Vietnam, culminating on the eve of our Bicentennial provides an unsurpassed opportunity for those redemptive acts of commitment to our fellow human beings which has for two centuries marked our progress as a nation."<sup>38</sup> U.S. policy makers took their shot at redemption, aiming to deflect attention from America's loss in Vietnam by casting refugee resettlement as part of a long tradition of American generosity.

Through the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, Ford authorized dependents of Americans, Republic of Vietnam government and military officials, and other "high risk cases," those "whose lives and welfare would be endangered by a Communist regime" to be admitted into the United States. "Our objective throughout these agonizing days has been to deal honorably with the tragedy of the moment in view of our long relationship with Vietnam

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35. "President Ford 'Damn Mad' Over Resistance to Refugees," *Oceanside Blade-Tribune*, May 6, 1975, Section 1, 2.

36. "Ford Signs \$405 Million Bill to Resettle Refugees," *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 1975, Section I, 6.

37. For a detailed account of refugee resettlement in the United States, particularly during the Cold War, see Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*. See also Memorandum for Lt. General Brent Scowcroft, the White House. Subject: Waivers for Admission of Refugees, April 15, 1975, folder: Indochina Refugees, box 19, John O. Marsh Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

38. House Resolution, June 11, 1975, folder: Indochina Refugees – General, box 19, John O. Marsh Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

and its people. We have tried especially to bring out through the airlift Vietnamese with a special relationship of blood, marriage, or loyalty," wrote members of the IATF, a group Ford assembled to manage the refugee situation.<sup>39</sup> Beginning on U.S. military helicopters, aircraft, and ships, the journey of Operation New Life and New Arrivals featured stops throughout the South Pacific including Guam, Wake Island, the Philippines, and Hawaii before arriving at one of four stateside military posts that had been transformed into refugee camps: Camp Pendleton in southern California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania.<sup>40</sup> Each camp accommodated approximately 20,000 refugees and served as a temporary home for about 90 days, after which time refugees would be resettled permanently.<sup>41</sup>

The refugees arrived hauling expensive American luggage and dressed in Western fashions, most appearing to be in good health. At least 50 percent were women and their children, teenage girls, and elderly people. The gold jewelry hanging from their necks and wrists and encircling their fingers contrasted sharply with the "tin can" Quonset huts that would serve as temporary homes until sponsors offered to resettle them in American cities and towns.<sup>42</sup> Some refugees, such as those married or related to Americans, had family members already living in the United States who could sponsor them to be resettled. Others had to wait for sponsorship, which typically came from churches and other types of humanitarian groups.

To pass the time while waiting in the camps for news on family members and details on potential sponsorships, refugees chatted with one another, played games, and sought to put their professional skills to work as needed. Refugees who were doctors, nurses, and dentists provided medical services in their camps, and those who were fluent in English offered translation assistance. The Presidential Commission on Refugees and Evacuees sought to organize Vietnamese refugees to help Americans understand their culture through an initiative called the National Campaign of Acceptance. Suggested events included creating refugee theater troupes to perform at cultural centers in U.S. cities and sports teams to compete in soccer and ping pong tournaments. The initiative's theme, "Give a guy a chance – that's the American war," was meant to appeal to an "American sense of fair play," and members of the commission hoped it would have a special resonance in light of the U.S. bicentennial, when Americans might be compelled to remember the history of the United States as a nation of

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39. "Vietnam," no author, no date, box 10, folder: Indochina Refugees – Interagency Task Force, box 10, Theodore C. Marrs Files, Gerald R. Ford Library; "HEW Task Force for Indochina Refugees Report to the Congress" June 15, 1976, *ibid*.

40. Marc Povell, "The History of Vietnamese Immigration," The American Immigration Law Foundation, June 2, 2005, [http://www.aifl.org/awards/benefit2005/vietnamese\\_essay.shtml](http://www.aifl.org/awards/benefit2005/vietnamese_essay.shtml).

41. "Military Bases Readied for the Refugees," *Independent Journal*, April 28, 1975, 4.

42. "Future uncertain for 'hardcore refugees'," *Escondido Times-Advocate*, May 2, 1975, Section A, 7.

immigrants.<sup>43</sup> Some refugees attempted to control their fate in terms of where in the United States they would end up. A group of 300 refugees at Fort Chaffee, led by a Vietnamese priest, petitioned to move together to the Louisiana coast to establish fishing communities.<sup>44</sup> For U.S. officials and for the evacuees, the refugee camps were a space in which to establish Vietnamese identities, as new members of the American community and as people of a diaspora.

For many of these “first wave” refugees, readjusting to life in the United States would involve accepting that they could not hold the prestigious professions they had in Vietnam.<sup>45</sup> Their nonresident alien status prevented them from working for the government and enlisting or being commissioned as an officer in the Army.<sup>46</sup> Doctors, lawyers, and other specialists whose careers required a license would not be allowed to practice without obtaining a U.S. license, which would have meant additional schooling. Some rural communities petitioned the IATF to send Vietnamese doctors and dentists to provide services that were lacking in their towns, but the supply far outweighed such demand.<sup>47</sup> They were “not your average rice-paddy farmers,” as a USAID official at Camp Pendleton put it. However, although most had been middle-class or wealthy, they would not be for long, the USAID official pointed out, noting, “it’s going to be a different world for them.”<sup>48</sup> The dismal realities the refugees faced as they started their new lives in the United States cast a pall over what the Ford administration tried to cast as salvation.

One escapee who received particularly close scrutiny was Nguyen Cao Ky, who, along with thirty Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) generals took flight to the United States just days after promising to “fight to the death” against the approaching North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops.<sup>49</sup> Ky landed at Camp Pendleton, intending to trade his flashy trademark jump suits for denim overalls and hoping “for a fresh start as a farmer in Texas or Arkansas.” Easy with reporters, Ky acted as an unofficial spokesman for the refugees at Pendleton, where he lived in a tent with ten relatives for 18 days before being

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43. Memorandum to Mr. Von Marbod, Department of the Army, Principal Deputy Assistant, Secretary of Defense Comptroller, May 21, 1975, box 1, folder 2, Entry # A1-1680, RG 319.

44. Memorandum for Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, Department of the Army, July 17, 1975, box 1, folder 4, RG 319.

45. After the initial 130,000 refugees paroled into the U.S. under Operation New Life/New Arrivals, two additional “waves” of Vietnamese refugees came to the United States between the late seventies and mid-eighties. For more information on the second and third waves, see Paul Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America* (Bloomington, IN, 1992).

46. Memorandum from Major General Charles R. Sniffin, Department of the Army, “New Life and New Arrivals: Army Support of the Indochinese Refugee Program,” 1977, box 21, folder “Operation New Life,” RG 319.

47. Letter from Floyd A. Cropper, president, Lyons Industrial Development Corp., Lyons, Nebraska, to Senator Carl Curtis, May 20, 1975, folder: Indochina Refugees – Interagency Task Force, box 10, Theodore C. Marrs Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

48. “Future uncertain for ‘hardcore refugees,’” *Escondido Times-Advocate*, May 2, 1975, Section A, 7.

49. George McArthur, “At Least 30 S. Vietnam Generals Flee to Safety,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1975, Section 1, 5.

sponsored by a nonprofit organization called Food for the Hungry and eventually settling with his family in Fairfax, Virginia. His goal was to create a farming commune for other Vietnamese refugees, possibly somewhere in Arkansas or Arizona, where John Wayne had tipped Ky off to a large parcel of available land near his ranch.<sup>50</sup>

Upon arrival at refugee camps in the Pacific and in the continental United States American troops provided the first contact many refugees on Guam had with the United States. On Guam, Navy Seabees not only erected enough tents to accommodate more than 25,000 exiles but also cooked meals and assisted immigration authorities in processing those who arrived on the island. One Navy ensign explained that the Seabees had prepared more than one ton of rice per day in the first week of the refugee resettlement.<sup>51</sup> At Fort Benning, Georgia, members of the 34th Medical Battalion worked in shifts alongside civilians and other military staff to take care of Vietnamese children believed to have been orphans. "It's beautiful training for the men and a beautiful experience," said Major Jo Wolf, a training nurse for the 34th. An article on Fort Benning in an Army magazine called *Soldiers* drew on the language of redemption by characterizing the work in this way: "Voluntary effort by troops and dependents shows how deeply the Army community cares for people."<sup>52</sup>

Nonmilitary volunteers working with Vietnamese children at Fort Benning and elsewhere expressed a similar sentiment. S. Alex Stalcup, a physician who was appointed chief of pediatric emergency services at the Presidio for Operation Babylift, wrote a letter to Colonel R. Kane, Presidio commander, commending the troops who worked with the children. His message acknowledged the surprising imagery he encountered on base when "so many times my left-biased mind was boggled by the sight of a military man resting quietly with a toddler sleeping peacefully on each arm; by troops of army wives who stayed up around the clock to feed, clothe, and nurture the children." For Stalcup, refugee resettlement was a cite of redemption, and seeing soldiers in their "gentle warrior" persona confirmed that. "This has been, for many of us, a time to learn, time to re-examine long-held beliefs, and most importantly, to grow. Now is the time that we must commit ourselves to building a world in which all children can grow to maturity from the strength of a family, an education, and opportunity for health care. With you and your men Colonel, I am given hope that the children have a chance."<sup>53</sup>

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50. "Ky to trade silk garb for bluejeans," *Escondido Times-Advocate*, May 7, 1975, Section A, 3; "Ky Turns Down Farm Offer," *Escondido Times-Advocate*, May 15, 1975, Section A, 9; John Dreyfuss, "John Wayne Offered to Help Refugees, Ky Says," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1975, Section I, 1.

51. "Crush of Refugees," *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, May 4, 1975, 13.

52. Janet Hake, "Operation Baby Airlift," *Soldiers* 30, no. 8 (1975): 50-51, U.S. Government Printing Office, Records of the Army Staff, Women's Army Corps, 1945-1978, box 94, folder 790, RG 319.

53. Letter from S. Alex Stalcup, Chief Resident at Moffitt Hospital and Chief of Pediatric Emergency Services, Orphan's Airlift, the Presidio, San Francisco, to Colonel R. Kane,

A photographer for the *Blade-Tribune*, a newspaper out of Oceanside, California, in San Diego County, captured the image in a picture, captioned "Good Guy," showing Marines Sergeant Dorsey Moore leading a group of Vietnamese children in a game outdoors at Camp Pendleton.<sup>54</sup> Like the Army troops and Marines who sponsored orphanages, visited schools, and held Christmas parties for Vietnamese children during the war, the troops involved in orphan resettlement symbolized one of the central ideologies in the rhetoric of U.S. policies toward Vietnam and, by extension, the Cold War world—that U.S. intervention was benevolent.

Even more uncertain was what lay ahead for the so-called "hardcore refugees," those who did not have connections back in the United States. Included in this category were those who had worked for Americans in various capacities, such as translators, clerks, secretaries, teachers, and maids. They had, as one newspaper reporter put it, "begged, bought, or stole their way aboard American mercy flights and have few if any of the proper immigration papers." For this class of refugees, "ranging from Saigon bar girls with half-American children to Da Nang bureaucrats," the future appeared far murkier because those who were not American dependents could not leave the military bases until they received a sponsorship to be resettled. Younger Vietnamese would have an easier time with it all, immigration officials speculated, because they likely could learn English and adapt rather quickly, but those of middle age and older might never find their places in American society.<sup>55</sup> By the end of 1975, all refugee camps in the U.S. and American territories were closed, and the first wave of Vietnamese refugees were resettled.

#### THE REPATRIATION MOVEMENT

Images of U.S. troops and American citizens welcoming into their arms tired, hungry, dazed Vietnamese exiles clashed with demands for repatriation and accusations that U.S. officials misled southern Vietnamese to believe that they would face persecution and death if they remained in their country. The repatriation movement, which was strongest on Guam but included a smaller group at Fort Chaffee, gave Hanoi and the PRG a highly visible issue to exploit for the purpose of accusing the United States of additional meddling in Vietnamese affairs. Through radio broadcasts and newspaper reports, Vietnam argued that the United States violated its sovereignty by sending repatriates back without Vietnamese government approval, and it argued that the United States created the refugee crisis by predicting a "bloodbath" in the south once the PRG assumed power. On May 6, 1975, John Ashbrook, a Republican representative from Ohio, spoke on the House floor about the "brutal bloodbaths of Communist takeovers"

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Commander of the Presidio, May 6, 1975, folder: Indochina Refugees – General, box 10, Theodore C. Marrs Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

54. "Good Guy" (photograph), *Blade-Tribune* (Oceanside, CA), May 9, 1975, Section 1, 14.

55. "Future uncertain for 'hardcore refugees,'" *Escondido Times-Advocate*, May 2, 1975, Section A, 7.

and cited several State Department telegrams detailing the executions of former employees of the Saigon government, including beheadings of police officers and the use of grenades to kill ARVN troops.<sup>56</sup> In their applications for repatriation, most exiles stated that returning to family was their reason for wanting to return, but Hanoi and the PRG spun repatriation as an example of U.S. encroachment upon Vietnamese sovereignty and accused the United States of forcibly evacuating Vietnamese it had deceived into believing they would be unsafe if they stayed. It was all part of a long-term plot to undermine Vietnam, Hanoi and the PRG contended. The concerns of Henry Kissinger and others in the Ford administration regarding international media coverage of repatriation and the departure of the *Thuong Tin I* make clear that Hanoi and the PRG could disrupt the image of a benevolent United States by peeling back the "humanitarian label" to reveal Vietnamese choosing their homeland and potential oppression over new life in America. As Lien-Hang Nguyen has demonstrated, Hanoi and the PRG had become skilled at using international public relations to "put a damper on great-power politics."<sup>57</sup>

Of the approximately 2,000 Vietnamese seeking repatriation beginning in May 1975, more than 1,400 on Guam had decided that they wanted to return home, while close to 150 exiles had already processed through to stateside refugee camps before seeking repatriation. Responses to questionnaires and interviews with IATF staff indicated that desire to be reunited with family topped the list of reasons for wanting to return, and organized repatriation movements developed on Guam and at Fort Chaffee, where Le Minh Tan, a former employee of the Defense Attache Office who was airlifted out of Saigon on April 26, 1975, hoped to go back to his wife and six children. He told a *Washington Star* reporter that South Vietnamese government propaganda frightened him into believing that the North Vietnamese would kill anyone who had collaborated with the Americans. Being away from his family made Tan think that seeing his loved ones again was worth the risk of death.<sup>58</sup> The UNHRC typically processed requests for repatriation, acting as an intermediary between the refugee and the home country to guarantee readmission, which only the home country could approve. To return to Vietnam, Hanoi required that each repatriate complete a questionnaire that government officials would review and make decisions on an individual basis. Moving at a slow pace, that process bred restlessness among the repatriates on Guam, and American officials accused Hanoi of showing "neither enthusiasm nor any sense

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56. "Communist Bloodbaths: The Media Looks the Other Way," *Congressional Record – House*, May 6, 1975, H3703.

57. Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 311.

58. "Families, Costs Here Alter Refugee Plans, *The Washington Star*, May 21, 1975. See also Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1982*.



of urgency" regarding the repatriates "except in so far as they could exploit their plight for its propaganda value."<sup>59</sup>

*New York Times* reporter Richard Halloran spoke with repatriates on Guam two weeks before they left on the *Thuong Tin I*, and he found that most had left Vietnam in the first place because either they feared Communist reprisals or they got caught up in the chaotic days surrounding April 30 and left unintentionally. Tran Thanh Tong, a former captain in the Republic of Vietnam's Air Force, boarded a plane to escape a rocket attack on Tan Son Nhut Airbase, but he did not know the aircraft was bound for a U.S. base in Thailand. His wife and three children remained, to his knowledge, in Saigon. Huynh Thi Thao and some of her family members fled an attack on Vung Tao, but when their sampan drifted out to sea, the U.S. Seventh Fleet picked them up. Although some of the repatriates Halloran interviewed worried about the rumors they had heard about reeducation camps, others believed that Vietnam's new government would welcome them home.<sup>60</sup> U.S. Representative James Wilson told the UNHCR that even though the repatriates believed the Vietnamese government would welcome them in, the United States was prepared to take them back if Vietnam did not allow the *Thuong Tin I* to dock.<sup>61</sup> At the camp, some refugee hung a sign that read "We need a ship to repatriate ourselves" and a drawing of Ho Chi Minh.<sup>62</sup>

During July and August, stateside refugees were moved to Guam and held with the Guam refugees at Camp Asan, a 125-acre inactive Marine camp that was scheduled for demolition before the exiles arrived. Located on the northwest coast of the island, the camp featured two-story barracks with corrugated tin exterior walls and was surrounded by a chain link fence, and U.S. Marshals guarded the main gates.<sup>63</sup> The summer was thick with tension as repatriates began demanding immediate return to Vietnam and accusing the U.S. government of moving too slowly on the matter. One of the difficulties in dealing with a civil disturbance on Guam is that it does not have a militia or national guard, so it had to rely on U.S. Marshals or regional troops.<sup>64</sup> Civil and military authorities as well as the Marshals considered the repatriates "very restive and a constant source of concern," and in mid-August, the Pentagon mobilized Operation Garden Plot. Crafted in response to the urban unrest of the mid-sixties, Garden Plot deployed fifty Marshals to Guam at the same time Marshals were

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59. Memorandum from Major General Charles R. Sniffin, Department of the Army, 1977, box 21, folder "Operation New Life," Entry # A1-1680, RG 319.

60. Richard Halloran, "Vietnamese on Guam Explain Why They Want to Return Home," *New York Times*, October 3, 1975, 2.

61. Reuters report, untitled, undated, box 19, folder 204-02, Entry # A1-1680, RG 319.

62. Richard Halloran, "U.S. to Let Vietnamese Who Ask to Go Home Do So," *New York Times*, October 1, 1975, 1.

63. Memorandum for Major General Charles Sniffin, Department of the Army, 10 October 1975, box 16, folder "Operation New Life," RG 319.

64. Telegram, Department of the Army, Dec. 1975, Records of the Army Staff Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans Operations, box 19, folder 204-02, RG 319.

in Boston, Louisville, and Charleston, West Virginia, to quell violent unrest related to busing.<sup>65</sup>

Meanwhile, the United States asked UNHCR representatives to work with Hanoi to determine if repatriates would be allowed back in the country and under what conditions. Answers remained elusive, and at the end of August, restlessness morphed into violence as a group of repatriates burned one of the barracks and injured four Marshals. An investigation uncovered a small stockpile of Molotov cocktails, fabricated crossbows, stockpiled rocks, and various lengths of pipe.<sup>66</sup> On September 4, repatriates burned a former dispensary building at Camp Asan, and in response, the Marshals on Guam requested fifty armored vests and two armored personnel carriers to be used to deal with the unrest. Marshals and other American officials on Guam predicted that if the United States and UN could not reach an agreement with Hanoi about repatriation, the unrest could turn more serious and possibly deadly.<sup>67</sup> The Defense Department's after action report regarding the repatriates stated that "in an attempt to gain world attention, (repatriates) conducted violent demonstrations on Guam resulting in the destruction by fire of three buildings, and the injury of four U.S. Marshals."<sup>68</sup>

Violence was not the intention of the majority of repatriates, led by Tran Ngoc Thach, who after the burning of the dispensary called a meeting with the repatriates condemning the violence and asked for a meeting with U.S. authorities. The request was granted and most repatriates attended the meeting, where several elderly Vietnamese spoke of their desire to return home immediately. Thach said there would be no more violence and that the camp rejected the leaders of the violent uprising. Instead, there would be a peaceful hunger strike by twenty to thirty camp members until Americans agreed to let repatriates sail one of the nine Vietnamese merchant ships docked at Guam since carrying Vietnamese exiles to the island.<sup>69</sup> As talks between Hanoi and the UNHCR stalled later in September, the State Department approved the use of the *Thuong Tin I* to send refugees back to Vietnam in order to "prevent bloodshed on Guam where repatriate activity may well lead to violence" if the UNHCR and Hanoi could not agree on a timeline for the readmission of repatriates to Vietnam.<sup>70</sup> The U.S. Navy spent \$700,000

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65. Untitled UPI wire report, n.d., *ibid.*, box 16, folder "Operation New Life," RG 319.

66. Memorandum, Department of the Army, Under Secretary of the Army, n.d., box 18, folder "Operation New Arrivals Loan of DOD Resources," Special Operations Division, Entry # A1-1680, RG 319, NARA.

67. Briefing Outline for USofA, October 15, 1975, box 16, folder "Operation New Life," RG 319, NARA.

68. After Action Report: Guam Repatriates, Records of the Army Staff Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans Operations Directorate, Special Operations Division, box 19, folder 204-02, RG 319.

69. Telegram 080904Z, Department of the Army, CINCPAC Honolulu, Repatriate Camp Sitrep, September 1975, box 18, folder "Operation New Arrivals Loan of DOD Resources," RG 319.

70. Telegram 300357Z, Department of State, U.S. Mission Geneva, September 1975, Announcement of Ship Option, box 16, folder "Operation New Life," RG 319.

to transform the *Thuong Tin I*, a 487-foot freighter that had brought 600 evacuees from southern Vietnam to Guam, from a merchant ship to a passenger ship, although repatriates did much of the work themselves. Workers added sleeping quarters, latrine facilities, upgraded navigational aids, and other safety equipment. At the ship's helm would be Tran Dinh Tru, a former commander in the Vietnamese Navy with twelve years of experience, and his crew of sixty men included other former Navy and Vietnamese merchant marine. The Navy stocked the ship with enough food for approximately thirty days, and provisions included cases of canned meat, juice, fruits, and vegetables, as well as 29,000 tons of rice.<sup>71</sup> American spokespersons told reporters that the United States would respond to distress calls or any other reports that the *Thuong Tin I* was in danger while in international waters.<sup>72</sup> Although the government of Guam supported the repatriation of the Vietnamese evacuees because they "were a source of trouble" and "were creating a bad image for Guam," the Vietnamese bank that owned the *Thuong Tin I* owed Guam more than \$7,000 in port bills for having been docked at the island since May, when it brought 600 Vietnamese refugees to shore.<sup>73</sup>

Some repatriates chose not to go on the *Thuong Tin I* but still wanted to return to Vietnam, so the U.S. government asked the UNHCR to continue working on their behalf to secure confirmation from Hanoi that they would be allowed back in the country.<sup>74</sup> Because stateside refugee camps were scheduled to close by the end of 1975, exiles who wanted to return to Vietnam but not on the ship from Guam had to work through UNHCR channels after being sponsored either in the United States or another country.<sup>75</sup> When faced with a concrete opportunity to return to Vietnam, some refugees expressed concern about the re-education camps they had heard about, and so they remained reluctant until they heard from family members in Vietnam telling them it was safe to go back.<sup>76</sup>

Once repatriates had secured the use of the *Thuong Tin I*, Julia Taft, executive director of the IATF, and Henry Kissinger, Ford's secretary of state and national security adviser, worked to shape media coverage of the event. Their primary concern was that reports about repatriation must emphasize that Vietnamese refugees initiated the movement with no provocation by the U.S.

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71. David L. Teibel, "Viet Vessel Resounds with Work," *Pacific Daily News*, October 10, 1975, 1.

72. Untitled UPI report, October 18, 1975, box 19, folder 204-02, Entry # A1-1680, RG 319.

73. James A. Hebert, "'Without Permission' Repatriates' Ship Moved," *Pacific Daily News*, October 2, 1975, 1.

74. Statement to the Press from Robert V. Keeley, Deputy Director, Interagency Task Force for Indochina Refugees, at the Time of the Sailing of the "Vietnam Thuong Tin I," October 16, 1975, box 16, folder "Operation New Life," RG 319.

75. Telegram 031540Z, Department of the Army, Interagency Task Force, Movement of Repatriates to Guam and Thence by Ship to South Vietnam, October 1975, *ibid*.

76. Reuters untitled wire service report, October 1975, Entry # A1-1680, *ibid*.

government. Taft hoped that the less visible the U.S. government and military were in the departure of the ship, the less likely it was that the ship would be turned back.<sup>77</sup> It also could allay PRG concerns that the United States stacked the repatriate group with intelligence agents.<sup>78</sup> Kissinger stressed that press coverage should emphasize the "basic humanitarian nature of our effort," portraying the effort as the responsibility of the repatriates with limited U.S. involvement. There would be no ceremony or formal send-off, and while repatriates could hold a press conference, the State Department forbade U.S. representatives from appearing other than to answer technical questions about the suitability of the ship. The State Department authorized wide media access to the ship so that journalists verify that the *Thuong Tin I* was a noncombat ship and was seaworthy in response to accusations in Vietnamese media that Americans were going to put refugees out to sea in an unsafe vessel. Beyond that, coverage was to demonstrate that the U.S. government simply acquiesced to the repatriates demands, and once the ship was out of U.S. waters, it was out of U.S. hands.<sup>79</sup> Behind the scenes, Taft wrote in a State Department special report that neither the IATF nor any other U.S. government organization intended to block the repatriates' return to Vietnam. "We . . . have done all within our power to see that their wish to return home is realized," she wrote, suggesting that the IATF did not take as hands-off an approach as public statements insisted.<sup>80</sup> Any suggestion that Americans coerced refugees to seek repatriation could provoke Vietnamese authorities to refuse the ship.

Statements released to international wire services indicated that the Vietnamese government was not convinced. Officials argued that sending exiles back to Vietnam without approval from Hanoi was a violation of international law. On October 4, the PRG Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement contending that Vietnam had the sympathy and support of "world public opinion and U.S. progressives." The DRV's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Hanoi backed the PRG, releasing its own statement acknowledging the desires of refugees to be reunited with their families but emphasizing its determination "not to allow the U.S. imperialists to take advantage of this desire to carry out their sinister scheme against the Vietnamese people, thus violating the sovereignty of Vietnam and misleading public opinion. The DRV demands that the U.S. government respect the sovereignty of Vietnam." Failing to do so, the U.S. government will be responsible for

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77. Telegram 120157Z, Department of the Army, CINCPAC Guam, Guidance on Out-Processing and Departure of Repatriate Ship, October 1975, RG 319.

78. Telegram 031540Z, IATF Fort Chaffee, IATF Secretary of State, Movement of Repatriates to Guam, October 1975, *ibid*.

79. Telegram 110433Z, Department of the Army, CINCPAC Guam, Repatriate Ship: Public Affairs Planning, October 1975, *ibid*.

80. Report, U.S. Department of State-Special Report: Indochina Refugee Resettlement Program, September 1975, folder 15, box 01, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts-Jackson-Desbarats Study, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

the fate of the repatriates. The DRV concluded its statement by calling on world public opinion to criticize the repatriation without Vietnam's approval.<sup>81</sup>

A week later, the Hanoi newspaper *Nhan Dan* featured a commentary called "A Sinister Scheme, a Trick to Deceive Public Opinion," which accused the Ford administration of taking advantage of the Vietnamese it had tricked into evacuating to send them back to Vietnam as another act of ignoring Vietnamese sovereignty. The commentary linked the repatriate issue with America's "obdurate opposition to the applications of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of South Vietnam for membership in the United Nations." Hanoi International Service broadcast similar statements, arguing that the repatriates were not the problem; the problem was the United States allowing a ship of exiles to sail back to Vietnam without the permission of the Vietnamese government, which violated the terms of the UNHRC repatriation process and encroached upon Vietnamese sovereignty.<sup>82</sup>

On October 16, 1975, nearly 1,600 repatriates left Guam and set sail for Vietnam. Reporters from BBC-TV Hong Kong, NBC, CBS, and other news outlets covered the event, and as many as eighty-two U.S. Marshals were on Guam on the day of departure.<sup>83</sup> It was reported to have arrived in Vietnamese waters on or about October 31.<sup>84</sup> Once the ship set sail, Vietnamese media accused Americans of placing hospital patients, pregnant women, and elderly passengers on the ship without ensuring that medical care would be available on board, and a radio broadcast out of Saigon reported that one repatriate died during the journey, possibly from the rotten food with which Americans had allegedly stocked the ship. The broadcast also stated that two-thirds of the repatriates on the ship had been "personnel of the army and government of the lackey regime," including high-ranking military officers.<sup>85</sup>

It is unclear what happened to the passengers on the *Thuong Tin I*. Hong Ha, a reporter for the newspaper *Nhan Dan*, an official paper of the DRV, told Japanese journalists during a visit to Tokyo that once the ship docked, government authorities would investigate those on board. Those who passed would be allowed to enter the country and return to their homes; those who failed would be "interned . . . to study diligently in order to achieve good results," a reference to the reeducation camps established after the fall of Saigon.<sup>86</sup> Regardless of the fates

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81. Statement from Hanoi, Oct. 4, 1975, RG 319.

82. "DRV Foreign Ministry Spokesman's Statement on U.S. Preparations to Bring the Forcible Vietnamese Evacuees to South Vietnam," October 4, 1975, Entry # A1-1680, box 16, RG 319.

83. Telegram 092245Z, CINCPAC Guam, Department of State, Meeting with Repatriates Leadership Committee, October 1975, Entry # A1-1680, box 16, RG 319.

84. Major General Charles R. Sniffin, "New Life and New Arrivals: Army Support of the Indochinese Refugee Program," 1977, box 21, RG 319.

85. "Refugees Arrival on Ship from Guam Reported by Saigon," *New York Times*, November 4, 1975.

86. Japanese Press Reports on DRV Visitors in Tokyo and Comments, October 1975, folder 11, box 25, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06 - Democratic Republic of Vietnam, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

of the passengers on the *Thuong Tin I*, the repatriation issue was a loud and public challenge to the image of benevolence that Ford and others attempted to craft through Operation New Life and New Arrivals. Some 1,600 Vietnamese exiles opted to take their chances with the new government in Vietnam rather than stay in the United States, and some were willing to fight physically as well as vocally for the opportunity to do so. It is not as though Americans would have welcomed them with open arms. Public responses to Vietnamese refugees were largely ambivalent, indicating that much of the citizenry was not fully behind the "humanitarian label" that Ford and Kissinger stamped on resettlement policy. Along with repatriation, American public skepticism toward Vietnamese refugees tested the limits of U.S. image management.

A few days before the *Thuong Tin I* set sail for Vietnam, the repatriates presented an art display to Guam's Governor Ricky Bordallo as a gesture of thanks. Called the "Vietnam Homeland Art Room," the exhibit featured the paintings of Nguyen Binh, one of the repatriates. The works depicted images of Vietnam, as well as a painting of the *Thuong Tin I* at sea. During a ceremony presenting the gift to Bordallo, a repatriate spokesman said, "We are only victims of the evacuation program Operation New Life. We were evacuated reluctantly from our country . . . and that was the reason why we resolutely requested the U.S. government to send us back to Vietnam. In displaying our demands, our wills and affectionate desires to go back to our families, we had to fight hard by hunger strikes, demonstrations and walkouts, by tears and the sweat of 1,600 people."<sup>87</sup> By calling themselves victims of Operation New Life, the repatriates cast the United States as the entity responsible for tearing them away from their families, not a benevolent rescuer. They did not speculate on why the United States evacuated reluctant Vietnamese, but by emphasizing what appeared to be the coercive nature of the exile, the repatriates challenged the notion that they had been in need of saving.

#### CONCLUSION

On November 4, 1975, the *New York Times* reported that a Saigon radio station had announced the arrival of the *Thuong Tin I* in Vietnam. According to journalists monitoring the broadcast from a news bureau in Bangkok, it did not state where the ship had docked or comment on the fate of the passengers. The broadcast accused the United States of sending the ship out to sea without providing proper medical care or suitable food for those on board and alleged that bad food had resulted in many illnesses and one death during the journey from Guam.<sup>88</sup> If the point of the broadcast was to challenge America's "humanitarian label," a description of sick, hungry passengers cast off from a U.S. territory without

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87. George R. Blake, "Viets Leave a Memento," *The Sunday News* (Agana, Guam), October 12, 1975.

88. "Refugees' Arrival in Ship from Guam Reported by Saigon," *New York Times*, November 4, 1975.

confirmation that the ship would be allowed to dock at its destination might certainly do so. The United States had justified its evacuation of Vietnamese citizens from southern Vietnam on the grounds that they could be persecuted or worse by the incoming government, so why did Americans allow the repatriates to return home just a few months after the Ford administration and the U.S. military claimed to have rescued them? Was giving the green light to the *Thuong Tin I* a humanitarian move or an attempt to placate some troublemakers who were drawing attention to the problematic consequences of the U.S. evacuation from Vietnam?

As the war drew to a close, the United States had lost much of the credibility it had enjoyed after World War II. Speeches by Ford and others regarding Vietnamese refugees emphasized an image of the United States as a benevolent protector and friend who had a history of aiding those in need. As Ford explained it, the United States had a duty to rescue its Vietnamese allies from their common enemy and give their friends a new life in America. Undoubtedly, Ford, the troops and civilians who worked in the refugee camps, and those who sponsored exiled families cared about Vietnamese refugees to some degree. However, the repatriate movement challenged the paternalistic notion that the refugees would be better off in the United States. Versions of this idea had undergirded much of America's Cold War foreign relations, especially with the decolonizing world. Considering the chaos of the final days before the collapse of Saigon, it is easy to understand that some Vietnamese who did not intend to become exiles wound up in refugee camps. Yet in the wake of the Vietnam War and reports of U.S. mismanagement and atrocities, America could not afford for more attention to be called to its mistakes and shortcomings in dealing with Vietnam. The vocal repatriates who demanded to be returned home, and the statements from Hanoi and the PRG insisting that the United States follow Vietnam's lead on the return of evacuees, highlighted the complex reality behind the image of America's "benevolent supremacy."



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