

Thirty Years Later

Reviewing the Vietnamese-American Experience

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April 30th, 2005 marked the 30th Anniversary of the fall of South Vietnam, the end of the Vietnam War, and the sudden arrival of a large number of Vietnamese refugees to the United States. For the last 30 years, this day has been commemorated by thousands of Vietnamese Americans living in communities throughout the United States, from San Jose, CA to Falls Church, VA. It is a day with events that include memories of their homeland, criticisms of the Vietnamese government, celebration of their achievements since their arrival, a reinforcement of their ethnic solidarity, and a day to build a stronger Vietnamese American community. How and why did they resettle here? What has been their adaptation process, and how is it different from that of other immigrant groups? The following essay will offer a brief overview of the literature and recent research regarding these questions.

The 2000 census counted more than one million Vietnamese Americans living in the United States. Most Vietnamese immigrants live in urban and metropolitan areas with well-developed and vibrant ethnic communities. One of the major differences between the Vietnamese immigrants and other more recent immigrant communities is their original status as refugees from an unpopular and divisive war involving the United States. Because of all the controversies regarding that war, their initial reception in 1975 was mixed. Some Americans opposed their resettlement because of their negative views of the war, and because of their fear of negative economic and social impacts on American society. There were others, however, who welcomed the refugees because of their support for people fleeing a communist regime and because of their humanitarian beliefs.

We will not discuss here the many books, articles and films about the Vietnam War itself. One of the triggering events that led to the collapse of South Vietnam was the "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet-Nam," signed in Paris, France on January 28, 1973 by representatives of the United States government, the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), and the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). Under this agreement, the United States agreed to withdraw its military and economic support, which accelerated the deterioration and the downfall of South Vietnam. The flight of the Vietnamese refugees began within the country with the North Vietnamese

military offensive of mid-March 1975, and ended on April 30, 1975 when Saigon, the capital of South Viet Nam, came under the control of the Provisional Revolutionary Government. This resulted in the arrival of the newest Asian refugee group to the United States at the time.

Social scientists have generally divided Vietnamese emigration history into two periods, each with several "waves" (Kelly, 1977; Nguyen, 1985). The first period began in April 1975 and continued through 1977. This period included the first three waves of Vietnamese refugees to the United States. The first wave, with some ten to fifteen thousand people, began a week to ten days before the collapse of the government. The second wave involved some eighty thousand people who were evacuated by aircraft during the last days of April. The final wave during this period involved forty to sixty thousand people who left on their own in small boats, ships, and commandeered aircraft during the first two weeks of May 1975. They were later transferred to Subic Bay and Clark Air Force base in the Philippines and to the island of Guam after having been picked up, in many cases, by the United States Navy and cargo ships standing off the coast of Vietnam.

The second period of the Vietnamese refugees migration began in 1978 and continues even today. Since the fall of South Vietnam, many Vietnamese have tried to escape the political oppression and the major social, political and economic reforms instituted by the new Vietnamese communist government. The numbers are no longer as massive as they once were. A significant characteristic of this period, especially between the years 1978 to 1980, is the large number of ethnic Chinese migrating out of Vietnam and Cambodia (St. Carmail 1983; Whitmore, 1985). There were many Vietnamese who also left during this period. These individuals have been called "Vietnamese boat people" because the majority of them escaped in homemade, poorly constructed boats and wooden vessels (Grant, 1979; Haskins, 1980; Wain, 1981). This was a very dangerous process because of the poor conditions of many of the boats, the escapees' scant knowledge of navigational skills, the limited amount of provisions they were able to bring and, finally, numerous attacks by Thai sea pirates. The death rate of the "Vietnamese boat people" was very high.

To minimize the social and economic impact of the large influx of refugees, President Gerald Ford adopted the Refugee

Dispersion Policy. This policy served four purposes: to relocate the Vietnamese refugees as quickly as possible; to ease the impact of a large group of refugees on a given community; to make it logistically easier to find sponsors; and to prevent the development of ethnic ghettos (Liu, 1979). This policy was driven by political and financial factors, not social considerations (Kelly, 1977).

As a result, nine voluntary agencies were contracted by the government's Interagency Task Force to handle the resettlement of the refugees in the United States. These voluntary agencies were to find sponsors that were able to fulfill both financial and moral responsibilities and match them with refugees' families. The responsibilities included providing temporary food, clothing and shelter, assistance in finding employment or job training for the head of the household, enrolling the children in school and finally, providing ordinary medical care (Liu, 1979). In short, the sponsors would serve as a resource to introduce the refugees into the society while they become economically independent.

There were four ways for the refugees to leave the temporary refugee camps: resettlement to a third country; obtaining repatriation to Vietnam; demonstrating proof of being financially self-supportive; or finding a sponsor through the voluntary agencies (Kelly, 1977). The method most frequently used by Vietnamese refugees was the family sponsorship method. The other three ways were impractical and difficult. Only a small number of refugees chose to return to Viet Nam. Darell Montero and Marsha Weber (1979) reported that "by October 1975, repatriation had been granted to 1,546 refugees." The majority were military men who were forced to leave their families behind at the time of their evacuation. Similarly, given the nature of their plight, very few refugees had the required resources and few other countries offered their assistance.

As a result, sponsors found by voluntary agencies consisted of religious congregations, parishes or affiliates, individual families, corporations, and companies with former Vietnamese employees. If the refugees had relatives who could fulfill the same requirements, they could qualify as sponsors as well. However, Skinner (1980) reported only 15,000 Vietnamese living in the United States prior to 1975. Most of these individuals were students staying temporarily on visas, former diplomats, or wives of American soldiers. In essence, there was no Vietnamese-American community and thus this method hardly applied to the first waves of refugees.

Nevertheless, the Vietnamese from the first waves used the family sponsorship method more frequently at a later time in order to sponsor family and relatives who were stranded in Vietnam after 1975. The primary ways in which this method was used was through the implementation of two Federal Government sponsored programs that resulted from the Conference on Indochinese Refugees held in Geneva, Switzerland on June 14, 1980. These programs were the Orderly Departure Program and the Humanitarian Operation Program. The goal of these programs, as stated in congressional hearings, was to "provide Vietnamese a 'viable alternative' to dangerous clandestine departure by boat or over land." Many Vietnamese families who arrived during the first and second

period, and who now have citizenship or permanent residence status, used the first category to bring family members to the United States.

There were also others who arrived under the Humanitarian Operation Program. The majority of these individuals were older refugees who spent their adulthood as soldiers or civil servants in the South Vietnamese government. They would qualify under the HO Program if they were imprisoned in "re-education" or labor camps for a number of years and could demonstrate this fact. As a result of spending many years doing physical labor with limited nourishment in unbearable conditions, many of the people who came under this program were physically, psychologically and emotionally spent when they arrived. This group within the Vietnamese American community has faced many problems in adjusting to life in the US (Tran, 2000).

Vietnamese American communities have continued to form, develop and expand over the last 30 years. Although the initial group of Vietnamese refugees was dispersed throughout the United States, they have since congregated in several states after their initial arrival. There are many reasons why these communities formed in specific states. First, most communities were a result of the patterns of sponsorship during the initial arrival. In other words, communities tended to form in cities and states that initially received more refugees than others. This created both a critical mass and the opportunity for people to seek out each other for friendship in a new environment. From there, certain needs that were unfulfilled, including food, social services, and religious support, were developed and provided by the people themselves. Family reunification was an important variable that compelled people to migrate. Those with extended families who were originally separated sought ways to live closer to their families in order to receive support from this kinship network.

Second, most refugees chose to migrate to states with job opportunities, especially those that required little English proficiency and specific skills. These tended to be jobs in the high-tech industry, as assembly line workers, as low-level technicians, as quality control workers, in low-end manufacturing positions, in the service sector, and in garment, agricultural, and similar industries. Third, they concentrated in areas where the cost of housing and overall cost of living was reasonable (at the time) so that they could fulfill the dream of home ownership. Fourth, most of the communities were formed in areas where the weather was milder than their original destinations and more like the weather in Vietnam. These and other variables played a significant role in the secondary migration process that led to the continuing development of Vietnamese American communities throughout the United States but concentrated in a few states. Data from the 2000 Census indicate that California is still the state most preferred by Vietnamese immigrants, followed by Texas, Washington, Virginia, Louisiana, Florida, and Pennsylvania. These seven states together include almost 73% of the total number of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States.

One of the benefits that Vietnamese Americans have enjoyed since their arrival in 1975 is a more tolerant climate in the United

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States compared to other times in American history. America has gone through tremendous social, political, educational, and religious changes as a result of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the emergence of minorities of color as a social and political force. In addition, the 1965 Immigration Act had a tremendous impact on race relations in America (Chan, 1991, Warner, 1999, Eck, 2001). This legislation opened the door for immigration by allowing many different immigrants to enter the United States. It also allowed them to bring their own culture, ethnic background, and, more importantly, their religions. In short, for Vietnamese refugees, although there was tremendous pressure to quickly assimilate economically, there was much less pressure to assimilate socially and religiously. As such, they were allowed to practice their religions without much interference and scrutiny and with much more freedom than at any other time in history.

While their initial focus was economic survival and adaptation to life in America, Vietnamese have recently turned their attention to claiming a voice in America by participating in all the available social, political, economic and educational institutions. Although they originally focused on homeland politics and the overthrow of the Vietnamese Communist government, with the coming of age of a new generation they have expanded their activity into issues in the United States as well. While they continue to bring attention to the issues of human rights violations and religious persecution in Viet Nam to Congress and the public with demonstrations, petitions, and full-page advertising in newspapers, they have also focused on issues relating to their status in the United States. To this end, there is an increase in the numbers of Vietnamese Americans engaged in the political process in recent years with a number of Vietnamese Americans running for political office. There are also recent indications of Vietnamese Americans building coalitions and alliances with other groups, especially in demanding more accountability from the local police and legal institutions.

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