Reacting to the Unexpected

The U.S. Military’s Role in the 1975 Vietnamese Refugee Evacuation and Resettlement Operations

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History 400b: Senior Thesis

Senior Thesis

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Haverford College

April 27, 2018
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Studying history is like fighting an uphill battle. With everyday that passes, the details of the past become more obscured by the fragility of memory, the limits of archives, and the encroachment of bias. Despite these challenges, history matters. What happened in the past humbles, inspires, and educates people in the present. From my very first college history course, I have loved taking on the challenges of understanding history because what occurred in the past significantly shapes society today. My thesis is the ultimate product of my four years of college education, the generous help of my friends, guidance from professors, and the love of my family. For those who are the descendants of refugees, who oppose refugee immigration, or who are refugees personally, I hope my project sheds more light on the journey of one group of refugees who fled violence and came to the United States.

I am so grateful to the many people who helped me create “Reacting to the Unexpected.” Without your help, this project would not have been possible and “thank you” fails to communicate the deep appreciation I feel for your support. First of all, I would like to thank Margaret Schaus of the Haverford College Libraries. She is an archival angel and has generously helped me track down historical sources throughout my time at Haverford. I am indebted to the guidance of James Merrell and Robert Brigham of the Vassar College History department, whose courses inspired me to study American history and American international history in particular. Furthermore, Alexander Kitroeff’s course, Topics in European History: Nationalism & Immigration, made me excited to learn more about how national identities are shaped by boarders and how migration changes national character. I would like to thank Nimisha Ladva whose Film Studies course I loved and who provided me critical insight on the American immigrant experience. My thesis would not have been possible without the generous help of
Andrew Friedman whose course Cultural Landscapes of American Empire opened my eyes to how the U.S. military uses bases around the globe. Paul Smith, thank you so much for your feedback and constant faith in me throughout this process. Furthermore, my deepest thanks go to Linda Gerstein who always challenged me to dig deeper, write better, and be the best person I can be. Whenever my progress slowed down, both of your insights and ability to draw connections across history as well as to the contemporary world pushed me further. Thank you does not convey the deep appreciation I have for the many wonderful professors who have helped me complete this project. Not only have you helped me create this essay that I am proud of, you also helped me learn and develop into the person I am today.

Everything I do including this thesis would not be possible without my friends and family. I am particularly indebted to Abby Cox ‘18 of the Haverford College Writing Center and Hannah Misangyi ‘19 for their friendship and edits. Also, Thank you Annika Ulrich ’18 and James Forse ’18 for encouraging me at every step of this process and make writing sixty pages fun. I would also like to thank the entire Haverford Men’s Lacrosse Team for being the best group of friends I could ever ask for.

Lastly, I owe everything to the support of my family, particularly my mom, dad, and sister, Cass. Dad, thank you so much for your feedback on my writing and driving to Fort Indiantown Gap to chase down artifacts. You made a day looking through stacks of papers in a museum enjoyable and a day that I will remember forever. Mom, thank you so much for your love and advice. Your hard work and determination inspires me everyday to be the best I can be. My time at Haverford has been the best experience of my life and I so appreciate my professors, friends, and family for supporting me all along the way.
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INTRODUCTION

As a result of last-minute planning and unsystematic execution, the U.S. government’s 1975 evacuation of South Vietnam brought thousands of unanticipated refugees to America. In order to evacuate and then resettle the growing number of Vietnamese refugees, on April 18, American President Gerald Ford created the Interagency Task Force on Indochinese Refugees (IATF).¹ The IATF was composed of eleven federal agencies along with the four major branches of the U.S. Armed Services. More specifically, as a member of the IATF, the Army operated the Fort Chaffee and Fort Indiantown Gap refugee resettlement centers.² Meanwhile the Marines operated Camp Pendleton in California, the Air Force operated a camp at the Eglin Air Force Base, and the Navy conducted Operation New Life that housed refugees on their journey to the U.S. at Guam and Wake Island. Days after being created, the IATF found that the refugees arriving in Guam and at the Navy’s Subic Bay facility were less familiar with English and less accustomed to American culture than they had expected. During the mid-1970s’ economic recession, the refugees’ lack of familiarity with American life alarmed the IATF and made them worry that their refugee resettlement operation would flood the already strained American job market with unskilled and unemployable Asian refugees. Even worse, they were concerned that the refugees’ unanticipated lack of English fluency would make the refugees unemployable, and as a result the refugees would not only be a burden on the economy but also would increase the

² The Army’s role within Operation New Arrivals versus the role of other government agencies is difficult to isolate since it was constantly changing and is not clearly defined. In the Army’s own worse expressed in the Operation’s After Action Report, “initial plans did not envision the Army playing a part in the resettlement processing of the refugees since this was an operation to be run by designated civilian agencies of the US Government… However, the sheer volume of refugees and the lack of time to prepare for the situation made it impossible for the civilian agencies alone to handle the processing and as a result the Army the gap with military personnel.” After Action Report, I-C-5.
number of people dependent on U.S. government welfare. To mitigate these risks, the IATF Operation New Arrivals program utilized four domestic military bases to keep the seemingly unemployable refugees separated from American society until the government agencies could help prepare the refugees and control their initial immigration. Conversely, refugees who had sufficient financial resources or who had already worked at American companies in Vietnam quickly moved through the bases and resettled in America.³

Although the U.S. military’s evacuation of 1975 of South Vietnam resettled an unanticipated group of refugees who did not seem prepared to live in America, the IATF adjusted their plans and utilized four domestic military bases to temporarily separate the refugees from American society. On the bases, the IATF and government agencies like the U.S. Army utilized cultural education, a strategy of diffuse geographic resettlement called sponsorship, and active PR to help the refugees become successful Americans as well as to minimize potential negative backlash from the American public against the Inter Agency operation.

Refugees and Immigrants in The Twentieth Century: From Restrictionism to Refugee Humanitarianism

Oscar Handlin’s 1951 Pulitzer Prize winning book, The Uprooted, argues that the history of immigration in America is the paramount phenomena of America’s entire history. Handlin makes this clear on the first page of The Uprooted, stating, “once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history.”⁴ But

if immigration is such a prominent part of American history, what is the place of refugees in American history?

Sometimes, fortunate refugees are able to immigrate to new countries, and often immigrants are refugees who escaped from persecution before they immigrated. In America, the history of immigrants and refugees is tangled. University of Southern California English professor and authority on Vietnamese-American studies, Viet Thanh Nguyen distinguishes refugees from immigrants by pointing out that “immigrants are people who move voluntarily from one place to another.” 5 While refugees are forced to flee their country by persecution or other forces. Furthermore, Nguyen holds that refugees are largely not wanted by the country admitting them. 6 The United States’ mythology prizes the immigrant and his or her ability to arrive in America with nothing, work hard at menial labor, and eventually move up the ranks through sheer hard work. In this way, the ideal American immigrant is able to provide a better life for her American children than she had for herself. Refugees, on the other hand have a very different story than America’s Ellis Islands immigrants. However, as refugees often have to be rescued from unfavorable situations in their home country and brought to America and thus they are given support that poor immigrants went without. For a country that cherishes its immigrant history, pervasive anti-refugee sentiment is surprising. Nguyen goes so far as to argue that even though immigrants are foundational to American mythology, refugees contradict American values. In his words, “in the United States, land of the fabled American dream, it is un-American to be a refugee. The refugee embodies fear, failure, and flight. Americans of all kinds believe

6 Ibid.
that it is impossible for an American to become a refugee, although it is possible for refugees to become Americans." The difference between a refugee and an immigrant is frequently minimal, only distinguished by immigration laws, methods of arrival, the migrant’s wealth and his or her racial background. (The same could be said of the difference between a legal and illegal immigrant to the U.S.) Though the history of migrants coming to America is complicated by these hazy definitions, comparing different migrations to the U.S. over the twentieth century reveals how the definition of a refugee took on a new and complex meaning as the U.S. government began resettling refugees fleeing communist countries during the Cold War.

Even though refugees have immigrated to America since the Protestants first fled England and came to Massachusetts, refugee immigration formally began after World War II. Handlin’s work mainly focuses on the experiences of European immigrants arriving in the U.S. from the early 1800s to the beginning of the twentieth century. Handlin’s book further exemplifies the disconnect between the terms immigrant and refugee. Most of “the uprooted” Handlin describes actually constitute immigrants who left Europe when the feudal farming system that sustained their communities for centuries gave way to economic modernization, leaving the peasant class jobless and in destitute. Yet calling Handlin’s subjects economic immigrants is not completely accurate as they were practically forced to immigrate to America for lack of other options for making a living.

*The Uprooted* does not directly discuss Asian immigration to the U.S. or Indochinese refugees, his work provides a valuable framework of the refugees’ experiences in America before they were referred to as refugees. Using personal accounts of immigrants as well as a

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wide range of scholarly work as evidence, Handlin eloquently describes the “uprooted” peoples’ shared experiences that established the foundation of the immigrants’ American experience. The immigrants all experienced an incredibly difficult journey, alienation from their origin communities as well as their new American ones, and eventually acculturation to U.S. ways.\(^8\) Writing today about the Vietnam War’s subsequent refugees, these three steps are descriptive of the roughly 130,000 people’s experiences. The journey was hard and uncertain, as many refugees who intended to flee communism were not able to and were put in Re-education camps, while other refugees were able to escape to America only because they took small boats into treacherous waters hoping the U.S. Navy would rescue them. The 1975 Indochinese refugees were also alienated upon arrival in the U.S., especially as they were split up and separated from each other as they were relocated across the country into American communities where refugee families became isolated minorities.

Handlin’s study concludes with a discussion of the restrictionist immigration acts of 1921 and 1924 that established quotas on European entries and barred Asian immigration.\(^9\) Handlin’s study of American immigration concludes as free movement into the U.S. began to crumble near the turn of the nineteenth century. Laws beginning with the Asian (1875) and Chinese (1882) Exclusion Acts as well as the National Origins Quota Acts of 1921 and 1924 represented a shift in attitudes towards immigrants. After nearly a century of free flow, American nativists worked to limit the immigration of Eastern and Southern Europeans as well as Asian immigrants who were arriving in the west. According to Handlin, World War II would eventually extinguish this

period of restrictionist sentiment, but the War and the changes it brought to American society did not erase the damage inflicted on immigrants by the restrictionist movement. As Handlin puts it, even after World War II ended restrictionism, the nativists and their exclusionary legislation permanently scarred immigrant communities:

The conflict removed the immediate danger from the situation and it discredited the racist thinking that had questioned their right to be in the United States. But it did not relieve their isolation; it did not settle the doubts as to how fully they belonged. These doubts were the larger products of a society that had moved to a restricted view of itself, of a culture that was beginning to think of itself as fixed rather than fluid, of a society tempted to prefer conformity rather than diversity.\textsuperscript{10}

It was in this environment, unwelcoming to foreigners, that the Vietnamese and Cambodia refugees stepped off their government charted airplanes and began their lives in the United States.

The Restrictionist Immigration Law that Helped Refugees: Using Section 243 (h) of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act to relocate Anticommunist Refugees to the U.S.

The United States 1975 Indochinese refugee evacuation and resettlement operation occurred when American society was first opening up to Asian immigration after decades of exclusion. The 1975 Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees were the first group of Asian refugees the U.S. government resettled in America, but the fact that the refugees were fleeing communism enabled the 1975 operations to apply legal frameworks that were first used during for the Hungarian and Cuban refugees who resettled in the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s. After a long period of exclusionary policies exemplified by the National Origins Quota System, in the 1950s

\textsuperscript{10} Handlin, \textit{The Uprooted: Second Edition}, 266-267.
and 1960s, U.S. immigration laws became more welcoming to Eastern European, Latino, and eventually Asian refugees as long as the refugees were (or seemed to be) anticommunist.\textsuperscript{11}

Before 1952, American laws did not allow Vietnamese or Cambodian people to immigrate to the United States. The Immigration Act of 1917, also called the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, banned Asian people from emigrating into the U.S. from all Asian countries except Japan and the Philippines (the Philippines was a U.S. territory until 1946).\textsuperscript{12} The Asiatic Barred Zone Act built upon the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and forbid immigration from most Asian countries until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 or McCarran-Walter Act removed race as a basis for rejecting immigrants.

Even though the McCarran-Walter Act was progressive in comparison to previous policies that barred Asian immigration, the allotment of visas was still determined by the National Origins Quota System that tied visa allotments to the demographic makeup of the United States according to the 1920 Census. More specifically, the quota system perpetuated American racial hegemony by limiting the yearly allotment of visas to 0.6% of the emigrating person’s nationality population in America according to the 1920 U.S. Census.\textsuperscript{13} Since Asian immigrants were largely rejected from the U.S. until 1952, the quota system continuously limited

\textsuperscript{11}In his 2008 book \textit{Americans at the Gate}, Carl J. Bon Tempo exposes that the U.S. operation to relocate Hungarians in the U.S. was more concerned with quickly helping refugees who appeared to be Anti-Communists than the refugees actual political background. Most of the refugees were opposed to Soviet influence in Hungary but they were not necessarily staunch anti-communists. Some of the refugees who came to the U.S. in 1956 and 1957 through Operation Mercy were actually former Communist Party members. Carl J. Bon Tempo, \textit{Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War}, (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 73-74.


\textsuperscript{13} Cohn, “How U.S. Immigration Laws and Rules Have Changed Through History,” \textit{Facttank},
the number of Asian immigrants allowed to emigrate.

The McCarran-Walter Act was passed in the middle of America’s second Red Scare and Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy’s investigation of Communist infiltration in the U.S. government. At the height of the Cold War and America’s fear of communism, Senator Patrick McCarran (D-NV) and Congressmen Francis Walter’s (D-PA) bill moved American immigration policy away from exclusion of certain races and placed in measures intended to protect America from the immigration of communists.\textsuperscript{14} Specifically, the bill enabled the U.S. government to reject and deport immigrants who supported Communism. But the McCarran-Walter Act also perpetuated the pre-war restrictionist movement Handlin describes albeit in new ways and with new language. Even though Senator McCarran was Irish Catholic and the descendent of immigrants, his law worked to defend America’s racial hegemony from Asian, Eastern European and Southern European immigrants by reaffirming the National Origins Quota System. Granted, while the bill extended immigration quotas to formally excluded Asian ethnic groups, the bill also maintained the National Origin System which limited the size of minority populations in the U.S. that restrictionists saw as threatening.\textsuperscript{15} Senator McCarran embodied Handlin’s description “of a society that had moved to a restricted view of itself.”\textsuperscript{16} The Nevada politician feared that removing the immigration quota system would “in the course of a generation or so, change the ethnic and cultural composition of this Nation,” during a time when it is “too perilous for us to

\textsuperscript{14} Tempo, \textit{Americans at the Gate}, 27.
\textsuperscript{15} Even though the McCarran-Walter Act allowed Asian nationals to immigrate into the U.S., race continued to count towards a nation’s yearly visa quota even in cases were a person’s country of citizenship was different their country of racial origin. As Pew Researcher D’vera Cohn puts it, although the law, “granted Asian countries a minimum quota of 100 visas per year,” these visa quotas were “still based on ancestry, not nationality; for example, a person with Chinese ancestry coming from the U.K. would be counted in the Chinese quota regardless of nationality/birthplace.” Cohn, “How U.S. Immigration Laws and Rules Have Changed Through History,” \textit{Facttank}.
tinker blindly with our national institutions.” The 1952 Immigration Act reflected Senator McCarran’s fear, shrouded in anticommunism, that unsavory immigrants could threaten America’s critical institutions, but a small subsection of his law eventually enabled the immigration of the very ethnic groups he feared. The immigration quota system was not removed until 1965, just ten years before 130,000 Indochinese refugees arrived in America.

For Cold War refugees, the critical part of the McCarran-Walter Act was a minor stipulation that enabled the Attorney General to admit refugees fleeing persecution as he or she saw fit. Section 243(h) of McCarran-Walter Act gave the President the ability to use his influence over the Department of Justice to admit refugees as long as they were fleeing persecution. President Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Ford utilized Section 243(h) during the Cold War to help refugees fleeing communism persecution in Hungary, Cuba, and eventually Indochina.

The 1975 evacuation and resettlement maneuvers were not the U.S. military’s first refugee operations. However, Operation New Life and New Arrivals differed from the military’s aid to Hungarians in the 1950s and Cubans in the 1960s because the 1975 operations

17 Bon Tempo, Americans at the Gate, 27.
18 Section 243(h) of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 dictates that “the Attorney General is authorized to withhold deportation of any alien within the United States to any country in which in his opinion the alien would be subject to physical persecution and for such period of time as he deems to be necessary for such reason.”
19 For example, in 1956 Operation Mercy facilitated the immigration of Hungarians fleeing their country after Hungarian Revolution was crushed by Soviet forces in Budapest. Hungarians who had opposed the Soviet’s in Hungary immigrated into America through the U.S. Army base Camp Kilmer in New Jersey. According to a CIA report on the mission declassified in 1994, the refugee resettlement operation “was motivated by a genuine sympathy and admiration for Hungarians and a determination to take full advantage of the propaganda opportunity against the Soviet Block,” even though many of the refugees “had little or no knowledge of the English language.” Gey E. Coriden, “Report On Hungarian Refugees,” CIA Historical Review Program, approved for public release in 1994, accessed March 3, 2018, https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol2no1/html/v02i1a07p_0001.htm.
helped Asian refugees resettling in America, breaking the trend of only aiding refugees of European descent. 20 SUNY Albany history professor Carl Bon Tempo argues that before the 1975 Indochinese refugee programs, Americans perceived refugees as people of European descent forced to flee their home country because of communist oppression.21

I. HOW DID THE REFUGEES GET TO FIG, PA?22

Gail Paradise Kelly’s 1977 book, From Vietnam to America, is the most in-depth and thorough examination of Operation New Arrivals at Fort Indiantown Gap (FIG).23 An education professor at the University of Buffalo, Kelly evaluates the impact of Operation New Arrivals’ educational programming. Her evaluation is enhanced by the fact that Kelly travelled to FIG during the summer of 1975 and was able to interview refugees in person. Kelly recognizes that as an American, Vietnamese is not her native language and she depended on a graduate assistant’s help to translate the recorded interviews with Vietnamese refugees at FIG.24 Even so,

21 http://www.processhistory.org/immigration-executive-order-panel/
22 The Army’s FIG Garrison unit, which is responsible for maintaining the base’s facilities, described Fort Indiantown Gap’s location in a base visitors information pamphlet. According to the Army’s pamphlet, “the site is purposely removed from urban communities, as benefits a military reservation of this type, but it is by no means difficult to access by automobile. Adjacent to US round 81 and Pennsylvania Route 72, it is bisected by Pennsylvania Rout 343 and 443.” “U.S. Army Garrison Fort Indiantown Gap,” Office of the Commander, U.S. Army Garrison: Fort Indiantown Gap, 2 “Historian’s Background Material Files,” Accessed at the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC) at Carlisle Barracks on October 25, 2017.
24 Ibid, ix-x, 8.
the majority of Kelly’s thirty-some refugee interviews were conducted in Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{25}

Although Kelly’s book is a very helpful and valuable text today, additional scholarship and research on materials declassified after Kelly published her book reveals that the refugees’ journey was not as simple as going from point A to point B as Kelly’s book title, \textit{From Vietnam to America}, suggests. The April 1975 evacuation operation, Operation New Life, that brought Vietnam War refugees to FIG, was not a direct or simple journey to America. Planned at the last minute, the refugees came from many walks of life and evacuated the Vietnam warzone in a multitude of ways, some of which allowed unexpected groups of refugees to immigrate to the U.S. The refugees were shuttled to U.S. military bases in intermediate countries such as the Philippines and Thailand before being transferred to U.S. military bases on Guam and Wake Island.\textsuperscript{26} From there, the refugees were finally transferred to refugee processing centers in the continental United States.

Even though the IATF’s actions in Operation New Life and Operation New Arrivals did bring Vietnam War refugees from Vietnam to America, a closer examination of the refugees’ journey reveals a complicated picture, and in particularly a disorganized start which allowed unexpected refugees to come to America, some of whom wanted to avoid the violence of the North Vietnamese invasion but who did not want to permanently leave Vietnam. Ultimately, the evacuation’s disorganized execution created an unexpectedly diverse refugee population leading the IATF to utilize military bases to temporarily separate the refugees from American society and eventually control their immigration.

\textsuperscript{25} Kelly, “Sources: Oral Sources, Vietnamese Refugees,” in \textit{From Vietnam to America}, 242-245.
\textsuperscript{26} Kelly notes the disorganization and last minute execution of the evacuation as she notes that “it was only on 25 April 1975, four days before Saigon fell, that Americans agreed to help persons formerly employed by the U.S. government or persons whose lives the [U.S.] government considered endangered.” \textit{From Vietnam to America}, 18-20.
The Panicked Evacuation and Failure to Filter Refugees based on “High Risk” Criteria

In the introductory chapters of her 2006 book, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, Sucheng Chan contends that the American evacuation was disorganized because U.S. officials, such as Ambassador Graham Martin, did not want to announce or begin an evacuation that could undermine the South Vietnam’s government authority and legitimacy.27 Publicly beginning an evacuation before the South Vietnam military surrender would create a widespread panic, so the Americans were unable to take action until late April. After South Vietnam’s President Thieu resigned on April 21, 1975 and it became “known that North Vietnamese troops had reached the edge of the capital, evacuation moved into high gear on April 22.”28 Just days before the Fall of Saigon and the Vietnam War ended on April 30, the evacuation hastily began. Kelly points out that the selection criteria for refugees was also organized at the last minute, noting “it was only on 25 April 1975, four days before Saigon fell, that Americans agreed to help persons formerly employed by the U.S. government or persons whose lives the [U.S.] government considered endangered.”29 As North Vietnamese forces surrounded South Vietnam’s capital city, American military and diplomatic personnel worked against the pressures of limited time and widespread panic to evacuate as many “endangered” Vietnamese as possible. But the evacuation became even more complicated on April 28th when a combination of Communist artillery and fleeing South Vietnamese pilots dropping “the ordnance their planes were carrying in order to reduce the load on their planes,” destroyed Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut Airport’s runways.30 With two days before the Communists took the city and without a runway for airplanes, the evacuation could

28 Ibid, 63.
only use helicopters and boats to help Vietnamese people at risk of Communist retribution. As the evacuation became increasingly chaotic, any filtering criteria intended to limit the type of refugees coming to America to just “high risk” Vietnamese quickly fell to the wayside, especially as refugee began to flee South Vietnam via boat. Chan’s description of the late stages of the evacuation is worth quoting at length:

   Tens of thousands of Vietnamese who were definitely at risk failed to be evacuated while some who were not at risk bribed their way out. More than one hundred and thirty thousand Vietnamese managed to escape before North Vietnamese troops entered Saigon. Over seventy-three thousand of them did so by sea. Men in the Vietnamese Navy spirited their families and friends to safety in their ships. Twenty-six South Vietnamese naval vessels showed up with some thirty thousand passengers at U.S. Naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines the first week of May. Other Vietnamese commandeered whatever boats they could and made their way to the waiting ships in the South China Sea or to the nearest ports in Vietnam’s neighboring countries.\(^{31}\)

Chan illustrates that both the situation in South Vietnam in late April 1975 and the modes of transport taken by refugees determined who was able to evacuate. As the North Vietnamese forces pressed against South Vietnam’s capital, Vietnamese people took advantage of connections and other modes of transportation to flee their country. Even though the U.S. State Department had only intended to evacuate “at risk” people, this criterion was not systematically enforced, especially when refugees were escaping on South Vietnamese vehicles instead of American transports. Furthermore, as pressure from Communist troops increased, evacuation

strategies quickly became disorganized and as mistakes were made the rigor of the evacuation filter rapidly deteriorated.

In an example of how adherence to evacuating only “high risk” refugees was not enforced is exemplified in Kelly’s retelling of an American consulate employee’s experience helping in the evacuation of Da-Nang, a city that sits about 530 miles north of Saigon on the east coast of Vietnam. On March 27, 1975, as the North Vietnamese Communist conquest seemed imminent, the American consulate started to evacuate all Americans, Vietnamese who worked for Americans, and a predetermined group of refugees.32 Yet, when the U.S. Navy’s S.S. Pioneer Contender that was supposed to transport 4,000 people departed from the Da-Nang Bay early and with only a fraction of its total capacity, the shuttle barges were forced to float for four days until other ocean-going vessels could pick them up. While waiting in the bay, the American consul employee remembers that “the barges filled up” as Vietnamese not intended to be evacuated “would commandeer fishing boats or any type of thing to get out into the harbor and to get on the barges.”33 Eventually, the American continues, as more people became part of the American evacuation of Da-Ning, the number of people went way past the largest boat’s capacity of “6,000 and there were probably 8,500 people on it. There was so little space left so that all body functions, all body needs, took place where you were sitting.”34 Even though the refugees who boarded the barges in Da-Ning’s harbor were just evacuated further south in Vietnam and were not directly resettled in the U.S., the American’s account of Da-Ning’s evacuation reveals how the Americans were largely not in control of who was able escape through the 1975 evacuation.

32 Kelly, From Vietnam to America, 25.
34 Ibid, 26-27.
Additionally, one South Vietnamese refugee who was later resettled through FIG, recalls fleeing with her family on a Vietnamese Navy boat without any official exit permits or visas. Written in 1988 and published in Chan’s 2006 collection, the refugee’s personal account titled “A Place to Call Home,” describes how she fled Saigon on April 30th 1975 even without meeting the American evacuation criteria.35 Describing why her family decided to leave South Vietnam, the refugee writes that as doctors and “educated professionals, my parents and aunts and uncles might all be killed,” if they lived in a Communist Vietnam.36 Furthermore, she notes the nature of her escape from Saigon as she writes, “as we neared the dock, we saw that the ship we had hoped to catch was already heading out to sea. Luckily, there was a little Vietnamese Navy boat commanded by one of my father’s friends, which took us out to the big ship.”37 After traveling on that ship for four days, the refugees on the boat were taken aboard an American ship that eventually arrived at the U.S. Navy’s former base at Subic Bay in the Philippines.38 From there, the family traveled to Guam where they lived for three months before flying to Fort Indiantown Gap from where the family was eventually sponsored to Philadelphia.39 The refugee’s autobiographical account is a typical backstory of the refugee who came to American through Operation New Life and Operation New Arrivals. Even though the U.S. government did not consider her family “high risk” the woman’s family felt that they could be in danger once the

36 Ibid, 155.
37 Ibid.
Communists took Saigon and as a result they fled Vietnam independently and eventually became a part of the U.S. resettlement. SUNY Albany history professor Carl J. Bon Tempo, estimates that like the family described in the personnel account, of the roughly 130,000 total 1975 evacuees, “65,000 managed to secure their own transport out of the country—often on boats—and the U.S. military took them into protective custody.”\(^{40}\) The Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization Services Leonard Chapman described the circumstances and options the U.S. military had for dealing with Vietnamese refugees floating towards American ships in small boats when he reported to the U.S. Senate after the operation concluded: “The Choice is to force them [the refugees] to return to the land they fled for fear of persecution, leave them at sea, or accept responsibility for them.”\(^{41}\) The story of the refugee and her family’s escape from South Vietnam and the large number of refugees who fled on their own vehicles instead of U.S. military craft highlights how the Americans had difficulty rejecting refugees who were already en route to American refugee camps. Furthermore, considering the refugee and her family’s escape via a South Vietnam Navy vessel helps explain how so many unintended refugees circumvented the Americans’ evacuation criteria and were resettled in the U.S.

As described by the American in Da-Ning and remembered by the refugee’s personal account, as a result of the 1975 evacuation’s increasingly porous filtering criteria, many Vietnamese refugees who the Americans did not intend to help eventually made their way to Guam and then the continental United States. Understanding the context of how the refugees evacuated from Vietnam and later arrived in the United State is critical for understanding who the refugees are and how Operation New Arrivals was organized. Hastily evacuated from Vietnam as North Vietnamese forces quickly advanced, refugees were taken by boat, helicopter,

\(^{40}\) Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 146.
\(^{41}\) Ibid, 246 n.37.
and plane to U.S. military installations around the Indochina region before taking up more organized stays on Guam, Wake, and the Midway Islands. In particular, examining the disorganized nature of the evacuation contextualizes how so many refugees who were not familiar with English or American culture came to the U.S. in the summer of 1975.

**The Fall of Saigon and Push Factors that Propelled Vietnamese People Towards Evacuation**

Push factors such as rumors, legacies of Communist violence against Northern Vietnamese people, and patterns of fleeing and then returning home added to the chaos of the American evacuation and caused many Vietnamese people to leave Vietnam with the American evacuation when they were not supposed. While in the chaotic last days, other Vietnamese people were evacuated even when did not intend to leave their home country. This subsection begins by examining how the threat of communist violence against Vietnamese anticommunists pushed many Vietnamese towards America’s 1975 evacuation program. Then, this section examines other push factors that caused Vietnamese refugees to unintentionally or mistakenly leave Vietnam through Operation New Life, complicating the eager and confident posture of the cartoon refugee immigrating to the U.S. as depicted by the U.S. Army’s map. (Fig. 1) Ultimately, I argue that a more accurate depiction of the refugee entering the U.S. would reflect some refugees’ shock that they would not be able to return home and regret that they had left Vietnam to avoid political violence that never occurred.

First, as shown by refugees’ personal stories, the arrival of unexpected Vietnamese refugees in America through the IATF’s operations is correlated with pre-evacuation stories and rumors of communist violence against non-communists. These rumors and memories of lived
experiences stoked fear that pushed many Vietnamese towards the American evacuation and away from Vietnam. While examining the role of fear as a driver of refugees from Vietnam to America, it is difficult to separate the anxiety that originated from an individual or family members’ experience of communist violence (especially from the refugees who migrated from North to South Vietnam in 1954 during North Vietnam’s Land Reform Program) and the fear stemming from anti-communist propaganda created by the South Vietnamese and U.S. governments. At a talk at Haverford College on February 14, 2018, University of Connecticut Professor Nu-Anh Tran pointed out that Republic of Vietnam (RVN) propaganda frequently utilized North Vietnamese refugees’ stories about fleeing communist violence to vilify North Vietnam. One example is the film “Chúng Tôi Muốn Sống” (We Want to Live), directed by Vinh Noan that tells the story of a North Vietnamese man whose parents were killed for being landowners during the 1954 Land Reform movement. On the other hand, many North Vietnamese refugees directly experienced persecution by the Viet Minh before migrating to the south and did not need additional anti-communist propaganda to motivate them to leave the country. Untangling the fear of communist violence based on the refugees’ real experiences from the fear manufactured by propaganda is difficult, but examining refugees’ stories indicates that fear of retribution was a push factor.

According to the chapter, “Leaving Vietnam,” in Kelly’s book, “American and South Vietnamese propaganda teams for years had predicted bloodbaths should the Saigon government fall. These rumors were rampant in the last month of the government’s life and Vietnamese sought to leave country because they believed them.”⁴² Kelly continues by quoting an interview of a Vietnamese woman being processed at FIG. The women attributed her decision to leave

⁴² Kelly, From Vietnam to America, 16
Vietnam to fear that she would be forced into sexual slavery by the communist government. According to Kelly, “this rumor was repeated by several refugees at Fort Indian Town Gap [sic],” yet “no such thing occurred in Saigon or elsewhere after the NLF [National Liberation Front] victory.”43 This refugee’s account connects the advance of the North Vietnamese Communist forces and their potential to cause her harm with her decision to flee to the U.S. While the sexual violence the refugee described never occurred after the Communist victory, another reason refugees were motivated to leave Vietnam was due to legitimate acts of violence that occurred earlier. For example, one refugee who evacuated from Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut Airport by plane on April 25th, 1975 attests to the Communists’ acts of violence during the war as his motivation to leave Vietnam. As he puts it, “I could not stand living under a Communist regime that had been responsible for shooting tens of thousands of refugees fleeing on Highway 1 in 1972 and for numerous acts of terrorism that I had either heard about or seen on television.”44 Yet, in many cases the real fear of violence was amplified by propaganda and rumors motivated many more Vietnamese who had not had direct contact with violence to feel like they had to flee in order to protect themselves.

Historian Andrew Friedman agrees with Kelly’s assessment that exaggerated rumors that the South Vietnamese people would face harsh retribution influenced the atmosphere in which the Operation New Arrivals refugees escaped Vietnam. In his 2013 book, Covert Capital, he states that American politicians in Washington D.C. further exaggerated retribution propaganda as they attempted to sway Congress towards approving funding for the operations. According to Friedman, as “officials held out the image of these people’s imminent massacre to the U.S. Congress to convince legislators to allow a major evacuation, and these horror stories circled

43 Kelly, From Vietnam to America, 17.
44 Chan, ed., The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation (2006), 104.
back through newspapers in Vietnam, the panic increased.⁴⁵ Yet, to a certain degree, North Vietnam forces did harm Vietnamese people who had been loyal to the South Vietnamese government, so some rumors were correct in alleging that the Communist Government would have revenge on the conquered South Vietnamese people. According to the *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, after the South Vietnam’s defeat on April 30, 1975, more than one million Vietnamese people were imprisoned in reeducation camps.⁴⁶ Though treatment from one reeducation camp to another varied, Vietnamese prisoners are known to have suffered terrible conditions, forced labor, beatings, and inconsistent access to food.⁴⁷ Between Kelly’s argument that rumors scared people to flee even when they would not have actually been harmed and Friedman’s case that the potential Communist “bloodbath” was propagated for political reasons, it appears that in panic, some refugees mistakenly evacuated Vietnam for America.

Additionally, in the chaotic and violent final days before South Vietnam surrendered on April 30th, 1975, other factors motivated Vietnamese people to flee their country. Although most of the 129,792 refugees who fled Vietnam did so willingly, a portion of the refugees did not understand the permanence of their departure. Many South Vietnamese people had already fled from their homes during North Vietnamese offenses in the early 1970s and were able to return after the RVN military retook the lost territory. For example, scholar Tuan Hoang contends in a 2016 article, during the Easter Offensive that started in March 1972, the Communist forces took large South Vietnamese cities such as An Loc and Quảng Trị but “with the help of American

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bombing, ARVN eventually repulsed the siege and regained the provinces, albeit at a high cost.\textsuperscript{48} The North Vietnamese forces’ final offensive in 1975 might have felt similar to the Easter Offensive to South Vietnamese civilians who reacted by fleeing their homes to avoid aerial bombardments and the Communist troops. Yet, this time the Communists’ advance ended very differently as South Vietnam conceded to the Communist forces as General Duong Van Minh surrendered the war on April 30, 1975.

The sudden end to the war came as a surprise to many South Vietnamese people who had become accustomed to the ebbs and flows of more than 30 years of warfare and had expected to return to their homes and remain in South Vietnam. Hoang exemplifies how shocking the end of the war was to South Vietnamese people as he quotes Nghia M. Vo, a 1975 refugee and author of \textit{The Bamboo Gulag}. “The loss of the country still stuns us… We did not know what to think about the sudden collapse of Vietnam; like drunkards we all seemed to be in denial.”\textsuperscript{49} After the Fall of Saigon on April 30\textsuperscript{th}, South Vietnamese people who left their homes for what they foresaw as a temporary period of violence, suddenly transformed from being briefly displaced to becoming stateless political refugees. As these refugees arrived at U.S. military bases on Guam, in the Philippines, and at Camp Pendleton in California, many realized that what had started as a temporary escape was becoming a permanent departure from their families and their homeland. As we will see in the next subsection, 1,546 Vietnamese refugees opposed Operation New Arrivals’ plan for refugee resettlement in America and pressured the IATF until they were given a boat to travel back to Vietnam. Many of these repatriates wanted to return home claiming that they had never intended to leave Vietnam permanently.

\textsuperscript{48} Tuan Hoang “From Reeducation Camps to Little Saigons: Historicizing Vietnamese Diasporic Anticommunism,” \textit{Journal of Vietnamese Studies}, Vol. 11 No. 2 (Spring 2016), 60.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, 60.
Examining the push factors that caused the refugees to evacuate from South Vietnam in late April 1975 helps explain why so many unanticipated refugees would ultimately arrive in the U.S., as they were scared of Communist retribution and were highly motivated to get aboard the American evacuation. Furthermore, the circumstances of the refugees’ initial evacuation contextualizes why some refugees (such as the 1,546 who repatriated from Guam) fled South Vietnam but did not want to leave their country permanently and start a new life in America.

**In the Middle: Refugee Processing on Guam and the Vietnamese Repatriate Movement**

Heavily militarized and featuring many U.S. military bases, Guam was the primary rendezvous point for the 1975 refugees on their way to America, and the island hosted 111,919 of the entire 123,301 refugees that immigrated to the continental United States through Operation New Arrivals.\(^{50}\) Despite the map’s depiction of the refugee’s journey as linear and straightforward, and articles published by the Navy in 1975 that praise Operation New Life as a miraculous, “heroic,” and “spectacular effort,” many refugees did not even begin the journey from Guam to America shown in figure 1.\(^{51}\) Nearly sixteen hundred Vietnamese refugees protested against their containment on Guam and called upon the U.S. government to allow them to return or repatriate to their native Vietnam.

In a 2012 article, Jana K. Lipman describes how the Vietnamese repatriates on Guam felt that they had been deceived into fleeing Vietnam and began protesting against the U.S. military.

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on the basis that they were being held against their will. Lipman contextualizes the situation of RVN soldiers who unintentionally left Vietnam and eventually came to Guam as she writes that when “North Vietnamese bombing began over Tan Son Nhut Airport [(Saigon’s airport,)] one pilot flew under orders to the U-Tapao Air Force Base in Thailand.” The pilot is quoted saying that he acted “as much to save the aircraft from destruction as to save the people on board.” Yet he did not see the significance and permanence of his choice to fly to the U-Tapao U.S. Air Force base in Thailand. As he put it, “living forever in a foreign country and accepting another nationality in not my choice.” In a more bizarre situation mentioned in Lipman’s article, thirteen RVN pilots were drugged and taken by U.S. Air Force personnel to Guam when they refused to leave U-Tapao, Thailand where they fled when Saigon came under attack in late April 1975. Covering the repatriate movement on Guam, the Washington Post reported on the thirteen practically kidnapped Vietnamese men on September 11, 1975, noting that the “the Defense Department acknowledged regretfully in August that this group was sedated and removed against their will, because Thailand insisted that they leave that nation, where they wanted to remain. The bulk of the refugees seeking to return say they left their country in mistaken confusion.”

52 Lipman, “‘Give us a Ship,’” American Quarterly, (March 2012), 1-31
53 Ibid, 10.
54 Ibid.
These stories in addition to the many Vietnamese refugees who wanted to return home to return to their families contextualizes the repatriates’ choice to return to Vietnam even after they had arrived in the U.S.

With the goal of being allowed to return to Vietnam, the repatriates protested in a multitude of ways ranging from peaceful acts of civil disobedience to committing violence against Guam’s U.S. marshals. According to Lipman, in July 1975, a group of 251 repatriates disregarded the IATF’s request that refugees stay at their refugee processing centers and walked out of their camps.\(^5^8\) Groups of repatriates at other military installations on Guam followed suit and in numbers of 200 to as large as 500 conducted similar protests. The protests spread awareness of the repatriates’ situation as they sported shirts and displayed signs stating “kill us or send back” and “we are not prisoners of war.”\(^5^9\) The walk out protests resulted in the repatriates being consolidated into a singular reprocessing center at Camp Asan.\(^6^0\) In the new setting, tensions rose and a protest in late August 1975 became violent, ending in the burning of a barracks building.\(^6^1\) Before their journey back to Vietnam, the messages and violence of the repatriations protests contradicted humanitarian depictions of Operation New Life and New Arrivals.

Following these protests, three weeks after the last group of refugees left Guam for the United States, on October 17, 1975, 1,546 Vietnamese were allowed to leave the refugee resettlement camps on Guam and return to Vietnam.\(^6^2\) In order to help the Vietnamese avoid the suspicion that they were American imperialist agents sent to subvert the new communist state,

\(^5^8\) Lipman, “‘Give us a Ship,’” American Quarterly, (March 2012), 18.
\(^5^9\) Ibid, 17-18.
\(^6^0\) Ibid, 18.
\(^6^1\) Ibid, 19-20.
\(^6^2\) Ibid, 8, 23.
the State Department “ordered its officials to ‘play down the U.S. role,’” and the repatriates prepared and eventually sailed home, independent of overt U.S. assistance. Without the help of the U.S., the group of Vietnamese repatriates boarded a commercial vessel, called the Thuong Tin I that was originally a South Vietnamese government cargo ship, and traveled back to Vietnam. Upon their return to Vietnam at the southern city Vung Tau on October 26th the North Vietnamese government put the repatriates in Communist reeducation camps. Trần Đình Trụ, a former South Vietnamese Navy Officer who was elected to captain the Thuong Tin, was confined in Vietnamese reeducation camp for thirteen years after returning home, the longest of all the repatriates. Any depiction of Operation New Arrivals is not complete unless it includes this story of 1,546 Vietnamese people who preferred to return Vietnam even in imprisonment rather than immigrating into the U.S. The repatriates’ struggle against being resettled in America reveals that Operation New Arrivals had glitches from the very beginning. As shown by the repatriates’ stay on Guam, in some cases, rather than helping Vietnamese refugees avoid Communist persecution, Operation New Life and New Arrivals kept refugees from returning home against their will.

When the repatriates left Guam on October 17, 1975, the majority of the refugees who had stayed on Guam had already been relocated in the continental United States. As Operation New Life progressed through the summer of 1975, the IATF was forced to hurry the refugees’

63 Lipman, “’Give us a Ship,’” American Quarterly, (March 2012), 22.
64 Ibid, 24.
relocation to the continental U.S., and quickly, the repatriates became the only group of refugees still on Guam. First, the refugee relocation had to be accelerated as the Philippines government asked the U.S. to remove refugees from American bases in Philippine territory which subsequently led to overcrowding in Guam refugee camps. Then, as June approached, so too did the threat of typhoons destroying the refugee camps on Guam, so the Indochinese refugees were hastily relocated to refugee centers in the continental United States. Within this context, Fort Indiantown Gap was selected as the fourth refugee resettlement center within the continental U.S. on May 19th in order to absorb the refugees from Guam and Subic.66 As visible in Figure 3, the Orote Point “Tent City,” which used to be the most populated refugee camp on Guam was nearly completely evacuated by June as typhoons began to threaten the island and the vulnerable refugee camps.67 FIG absorbed the largest portion of these refugees from Guam and the Pennsylvania resettlement camp’s population peaked on June 26th at 16,808 refugees.68 On November 1st, two weeks after the Thuong Tin I’s departure, Operation New Life officially concluded. Operation New Life’s completed its mission to relocate the refugees in the continental U.S. and many refugees would continue their journey to life in America within the four domestic refugee resettlement centers through Operation New Arrivals.

II. WHO WERE THE REFUGEES AND WHY DIDN’T THE IATF EXPECT THEM?

Although Operation New Life and New Arrivals was intended to evacuate “High Risk” collaborators from the Communist invasion of Southern Vietnam, in reality the Operations brought a diverse population of immigrants to the United States. The “first wave” population of Vietnam War refugees brought to the U.S. and specifically to Fort Indiantown Gap reflected the far reach of the Vietnam War in Vietnamese peoples’ lives and the chaotic nature of South Vietnam’s April 1975 evacuation. The presence of diverse groups within the refugee population at FIG in 1975 such as Northern Vietnamese immigrants, Cambodians, and generally immigrants who were not familiar with American customs reveals that Operation New Arrivals went beyond just the “high risk” and brought a diverse group to the U.S. Furthermore, as part of the Interagency Task Force on Indochinese Refugees (IATF), the U.S. Army’s Operation New Arrivals documents reveal that the Army had expected to receive upper-class Vietnamese people, who would be familiar with English and America culture, and as a result could easily adapt to life in the U.S. The actual population featured refugees from all walks of life, and subsequently the IATF felt that they needed to provide cultural education programs in order to prepare the refugees for life in America.

How were the Refugees different from what the Army expected?

According to the document completed by Army’s Operations and Readiness office in early 1977 (and declassified in the 1980s), Operation New Arrivals was intended to process immigrants who were prepared to join American society and the Army was caught off guard by
the actual population arriving at FIG. The Army’s surprised reaction to the refugees’ language and cultural backgrounds is revealed in the following excerpt from the After Action Report’s “Significant Problems” section:

At the outset of the operation, it was announced that the Vietnamese who entered the system would be those so-called “high risk” individuals whose lives were endangered because of their close associating with Americans during the Vietnamese conflict. Consequently, it was assumed that the refugee family heads would have a basic knowledge of the English language, American ways, and possess salable skills, making their assimilation into society relatively easy. Unforeseen was the massive influx of Vietnamese who had experienced little or no contact with Americans, who possessed limited job skills, and who were unfamiliar with our language. Compounding the situation was the inclusion of significant numbers of Cambodians and other ethnic groups.

In this case, the Army’s usage of terms such as “‘high risk’ individuals” can be interpreted as RVN soldiers, spies, politicians, and bureaucrats who were openly anti-communist and active in the war against the Northern Vietnamese and National Liberation Front (also known as the Viet Cong). The Army likely expected Vietnamese refugees that could be considered “high risk”


because the legislation that authorized the operation, the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, stated that only “high risk cases” could immigrate to America through the program.\(^71\) As historian Heather Stur notes in a 2015 article, when the law took effect in May 1975, President 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 to the United States.”\(^72\)

The quote from the Army’s After Action Report explains that resettling “high risk” refugees was easier, because “high risk” Vietnamese people had better English skills, more familiar with American culture, and possessed more useful skills that were needed in the American economy. Additionally, the After Action Report mentions, “the refugees who fit the ‘high risk’ category generally had American contacts, and helped arrange their own sponsorship.”\(^73\) As the quote points out, “high risk” refugees were easier to resettle because they often were able to organize their own sponsorship or bypass the need for a sponsor all together by demonstrating they had enough wealth that they were not likely to need government welfare. Kelly’s 1975 book attests to this claim as it notes that of the 1975 evacuations total 129,792 refugees, around 10,000 immigrated without a sponsor.\(^74\) This group was composed of refugees who either “had over $4,000 per family in liquid assets upon arrival in the United States or who were resettled directly by their employers from Vietnam.”\(^75\) As the quotes from Operation New Arrivals’ “After Action Report” and Kelly’s 1977 book make clear, receiving a population of

\(^73\) “After Action Report,” R-5, R-6.
\(^74\) Kelly, *From Vietnam to America*, 151.
\(^75\) Ibid.
only “high risk” Vietnamese would have made resettling the refugees much easier. Receiving only the intended “high risk” refugees could have kept the IATF and the Army’s role in the operation to just evacuating the refugees and providing legal cover for their immigration.

**Operation New Arrivals’ Sponsorship Program as a Reaction to the Heterogeneous Refugee Population**

As Kelly points out, the disparity between what the Army expected versus the refugees’ actual backgrounds forced the IATF to amend their plans for the program in order to prepare the refugees for life in America and to avoid the public relations risks that could come from introducing a foreign population into American society. This adjustment is indicated in the Army’s After Action Report as it states, “this difference between the actual and ‘design’ characteristics of the refugee population resulted in increased support requirements and extended stays in the resettlements centers.” In reality, at FIG and other refugee processing centers like Fort Chaffee, the IATF welcomed a population of refugees who largely did not have the connections or wealth to organize their immigration. Additionally, the After Action Report indicates that simply communicating with the refugee at FIG was difficult because “the American camp personnel had no knowledge of the Vietnamese and Cambodian languages.” The inability of the IATF to effectively communicate with the refugees slowed the resettlement mission and the Army called upon its 4th Psychological Operations Group to create the Dat Lanh newspaper in Vietnamese and Cambodian at FIG. The After Action Report concludes that the

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76 “After Action Report,” R-5.
77 Ibid, R-6.
“programs were instrumental in improving communication, but the language problem caused a general slowdown in out-processing.”

Though Operation New Life and New Arrivals possessed the veneer of military efficiency and professionalism, closer examination reveals that the evacuation and resettlement missions were planned at the last possible moment and were largely organized as they happened. American Studies scholar Nhi Lieu claims agrees that the last minute and disorganized nature of the evacuation and resettlement made the refugee population more diverse. Further, Lieu asserts that in America, that despite this diversity, the Operation made the refugee population appear to be a singular homogenous population of refugees, but in reality the population contained multitudes; in ethnicity, skills, occupation, and class. The refugee’s diversity was painted over by the IATF’s goals for the refugees. In the eyes of the IATF the refugees needed to be resettled as quickly and efficiently as possible. As a result, the IATF program depicted the refugees as friendly uneducated Asian foreigners ready to work hard at any job. Despite their portrayal the refugees’ diversity was a key driver behind the sponsorship and acculturation programs that took place at FIG which will be described later on.

The Journey from Northern Vietnam to Fort Indiantown Gap, PA

Portrayals of the Operation New Arrivals refugees as a homogenous group are complicated by the presence of Northern Vietnamese people who fled from the north to South

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78 After Action Report,” R-6.
79 As Lieu states in her 2011 book, “the U.S. government had intended only to evacuate American citizens and their dependents and ‘high risk’ Vietnamese officials and elites whose lives may have been endangered by the communist regime, but the extreme disorganization of the evacuation process made it impossible for this type of selection to occur.” Nhi T Lieu, The American Dream in Vietnamese, (Minneapolis, M.N.: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 8.
Vietnam and ultimately were evacuated from South Vietnam to America. Kelly’s investigation of the FIG refugees in the summer of 1975 notes that many of the refugees present at the camp were perpetual refugees who fled violence and persecution in Northern Vietnam in the 1950s only to have the Northern Vietnamese forces eventually follow them to the south. According to Kelly, the Northern Vietnamese people among the larger refugee population were easy to identify by their Catholic faith, an indicator of France’s imperialist legacy in Vietnam as well as a sign of previous American military evacuations in Vietnam. As Kelly argues in her book, “the immigrants are more heavily Catholic than a cross section of Vietnamese society should be” and “Catholics comprise less than 10 percent of the South Vietnamese population compared to 40 percent of those who immigrated to the U.S.” Further, Kelly holds that the large portion of Catholic refugees were a part of the 1954 refugee migration of Northern Vietnamese landholders and Catholics who left the Communist part of Vietnam in fear that they would be persecuted.

A personal narrative written by a Vietnamese refugee who fled Saigon on April 25, 1975 when he was seventeen years old exemplifies the experiences of many North Vietnamese people who were perpetual refugees, fleeing communism in both the north in the fifties and then the entire country in the seventies. His account published in global studies scholar Sucheng Chan’s 2006 collection should be taken with a grain of salt considering that refugee writers could be considered successful outliers among the entire 1975 evacuee population. Young Vietnamese American students at multiple campuses within the University California (UC) system wrote the refugees’ accounts. The refugee UC students took Chang’s course, which allowed them to improve their English writing and communications while Chang and her colleagues were able to learn more about the refugee experience. Just the fact that the refugee Vietnamese American

80 Kelly, *From Vietnam to America*, 14.
81 Ibid, 47.
students were admitted to the University of California indicates that these refugee writers were very successful in their transition to American lives. As Chan admits, the stories are not a comprehensive reflection of all Vietnamese refugees’ experiences because the refugees represented in the book were very successful in adjusting to life in America as attested to by their ability to succeed in American high schools and meet the UC’s admission requirements. The refugee (names are kept anonymous) was particularly fortunate as his mother worked for an American oil company in South Vietnam and through her connections was able to leave Saigon and resettle quickly and easily in Detroit. Still, the refugee’s story in the chapter titled “A Tragedy: From Vietnam to America,” provides a helpful perspective that reveals how tumultuous life was for some North Vietnamese families and why his family fled Communist persecution twice:

On April 25, after failing twice to get a visa from the American embassy in Saigon, my mother finally obtained an exit permit for our family… Obviously, only those Vietnamese like my mother who had prior contacts with Americans were fiver permits. Why did my family decide to leave Vietnam? First, my family had come from the North during the 1954 exodus. At the time, local Communist cadres threatened (when there were no international observers around) to punish anyone who dared to leave the North. In other words, the Communists were ready to wreak their vengeance on those who dared to “vote with their feet.” My grandparents were among the people who were being watched by the Communists. So, the members of my family had to sneak their way to the American naval ships waiting in Haiphong harbor that took people who wished to move to the South. As my grandparents’ experiences with Communism had been so negative

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82 Chan, ed., *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*, xii.
and intense, my entire family was certain that we could not live under Communism.

Moreover, having been refugees once, my family was less hesitant to become refugees again.  

The refugee who wrote the account is one example among the thousands of North Vietnamese families who migrated south during the 1950s. His story exemplifies how Vietnamese families’ multigenerational experiences with Communism was a strong push factor for younger Vietnamese who eventually arrived in America.

A recent article written by historian Heather Stur reveals that the migration of Northern Vietnamese refugees south can be traced back to 1954 CIA and Catholic Relief Services collaboration, Operation Passage to Freedom, that brought “one million Catholics from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) to southern Vietnam.”

Furthermore, in preparation for Passage to Freedom, “the CIA launched a successful propaganda campaign that convinced Vietnamese Catholics they would be persecuted by Hanoi’s communist government, the exodus was the largest civilian evacuation in history up to that point.”

Twenty years before Operation New Life and New Arrivals, a large number of northern Vietnamese people had already become refugees as they fled legitimate violence in the north as well from the fear of North Vietnamese violence spread by CIA propaganda. As the Vietnam War progressed more and more refugees fled to South Vietnam and Saigon’s population ballooned with Vietnamese people whose homes

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83 Chan, ed., The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation, 104.
85 Stur, “Hiding Behind the Humanitarian Label,”; Even though humanitarian military missions like Operation Passage to Freedom and later Operation New Life/New Arrivals Cold War first took place in the middle of the Cold War and offered inherent propaganda value against communism, the U.S. military still prepares to conduct humanitarian evacuations decades after the Cold War ended. See the U.S. Army’s handbook Psychological Support to Noncombat Evacuation Operations, the 4th Psychological Operations Group, (Fort Bragg, N.C.: 1995).
and towns were destroyed by war.\textsuperscript{86} Operation Passage to Freedom and the general migration of refugees south away from violence provides critical context to Operation New Arrivals, and helps explain why Gail Paradise Kelly met so many northern Vietnamese refugees at FIG in 1975.

**The Journey from Cambodia to Fort Indiantown Gap**

In addition to Vietnamese refugees, Cambodian refugees also arrived for resettlement in the U.S. at FIG. Although the minority within the refugee population, the Cambodian presence was large enough to warrant their own section of the refugee camp and intermittent publishing of the \textit{Dat Lanh} FIG camp newspaper in Cambodian.\textsuperscript{87} According to the local Harrisburg newspaper, \textit{The Patriot}, the first group of 480 Cambodians arrived from the refugee tent city on Guam on May 30, 1975.\textsuperscript{88} The article discusses how the IATF and the Army decided to segregate the Cambodians from the Vietnamese refugees who first arrived two days earlier on May 28\textsuperscript{th}, because Vietnamese and Cambodian people traditionally detest each other. \textit{The Patriot} newspapers explains the choice to separate the two ethnic groups by including statements by civilian coordinator Friedman who said, “I understand that there has been a long and continued history of antipathy between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese.”\textsuperscript{89} After Friedman’s account, the newspaper continues by including another perspective, “an American military officer who

\textsuperscript{86} As Kelly points out, “Saigon’s population in 1961 was 300,000; by 1975 over 3 million lived in that city. Da-Nang, Nha-Trang, and Hue experienced similar growth. The cities became filled with people who had experienced the war.” Kelly, \textit{From Vietnam to America}, 15.


\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
served three tours in Vietnam put it a little more bluntly; ‘the Cambodians and Vietnamese hate each other with a passion.” 

Ultimately the article describes that despite signs of that the two groups have bonded over their similar situation as refugees, they would be separated and their interactions would be closely monitored by FIG’s Army military police. According to the same article, when the Cambodian refugees arrived, “all of the signs [were] in Vietnamese and there is no one on the post so far who speaks Cambodian.”

The Patriot article attests to the diversity of the refugee population at FIG, in addition to the Operations lack of preparation.

The presence of the Cambodians at FIG attests to the far-reaching nature of the Vietnam War. Not only did the U.S. attempt to manipulate and protect the South Vietnam government from a revolutionary uprising, the U.S. government simultaneously supported an unpopular president in Cambodia. On April 12, 1975, just six days before President Ford established the IATF, U.S. forces completed the evacuation of American personnel and some high level Cambodia officials from Cambodia’s capital city Phnom Penh.

During the evacuation, codenamed Operation Eagle Pull, the U.S. Navy and Marines used helicopters to evacuate 159 Cambodians who had worked directly with America in the country’s war on communism.

Many Cambodians who worked with the American military stayed in the country despite the operation’s offer and ability to evacuate more Cambodians.

As a 2015 article in The Diplomat magazine claims, the choice to remain in Cambodia even with the option to leave indicates that

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91 Ibid.
many Cambodians were naively hopeful about what Khmer Rouge control of the country would entail. Furthermore, the fact that only 159 Cambodians escaped through the American evacuation hints that most of the more than 500 refugees who arrived at FIG had likely fled the intense bombing of Cambodia for Vietnam and from there they then made their way to America. Additionally, Chan points out that of the roughly 130,000 refugee evacuees the U.S State Department had planned to resettle in 1975, five thousand spots were reserved for Cambodian refugees. The fact that only a marginal number of the total amount of Cambodian refugees who resettled in America evacuated via Operation Eagle Pull indicates that it is likely that most of the Cambodians came to the U.S. through Vietnam or another intermediary country.

“High Risk” Refugees Journey from South Vietnam to America

Even though the total refugee population was relatively diverse, the originally targeted, “high risk” Vietnamese did immigrate to America through the Army’s resettlement centers at FIG and Fort Chaffee, though the same After Action Report notes that their numbers were marginal and constituted “only a small percentage of the total refugee flow.” For example, Nguyen Ngoc Loan, who served as the chief of RVN’s National Police force and was made famous by a 1968 photograph showing him executing a Viet Kong insurgent on a Saigon street, would have likely become a target of communist retribution if he remained in South Vietnam after the Fall of Saigon. Loan immigrated to the U.S. in April 1975 and started a new life with his family as a restaurateur in the North Virginia Suburbs. Loan and other Vietnamese people

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95 Ponniah, “Remembering the Fall of Phnom Penh,” The Diplomat, April 17, 2015.
96 Chan, ed., The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation, 62.
98 Gail Paradise Kelly, From Vietnam to America, 16; Friedman, Covert Capital: 196-210.
who had publicly fought or spoke-out against Communism and the North Vietnamese could be considered at “high risk” of communist retribution for their role in the U.S. supported war against Northern Vietnam.

However, the fact that this “high risk” group of refugees made up only a small portion of the total immigrant population indicates that from the very beginning, Operation New Arrivals did not go as planned. In her book, Gail Paradise Kelly notes that the refugees of Operation New Arrivals were composed of a population that was 54% male.\(^9^9\) Further, of the adults present, at least 57% had some high school level education or better and only 21% of all refugees knew some English.\(^1^0^0\) Furthermore, Kelly concludes that 10,674 refugees served in the RVN military, yet Kelly notes that, “of these, 6,047 were officers; 4,627 were enlisted men.”\(^1^0^1\) According to Kelly, the immigration of lower class enlisted men, peasants, fisherman, and their families who were not able to speak English convinced the IATF to create the sponsorship program in order to avoid the risk of agitating an American public facing an economic recession and high unemployment. In Kelly’s words, the IATF decided to institute the sponsorship program that would provide refugees with initial supervision and support only after April 25, 1975 when “it was clear that the immigrants could not be placed in the United States directly without causing major political and social problems.”\(^1^0^2\) Subsequently, the Marine base Camp Pendleton, Eglin Air Force base, and finally the Army’s Fort Chaffee and Fort Indiantown Gap were activated as refugee processing centers for a more extensive resettlement process. As Kelly puts it, “these centers existed because, given the unanticipated nature of the immigration, time would be needed

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\(^9^9\) Kelly, *From Vietnam to America*, 43.
\(^1^0^0\) Ibid, 48, 56.
\(^1^0^1\) Ibid, 42.
\(^1^0^2\) Ibid, 56-57.
to find Americans willing to take responsibility for the immigrants, to do security checks, and to prepare Vietnamese culturally to live in this country.”^103

Yet, the “high risk” refugees’ association with the U.S. military hides Vietnamese peoples’ independent cultural exchanges and doesn’t explain all of the refugee’s pre-arrival familiarity with American culture. Although some of the refugees’ familiarity with America can be attributed to what the Army refers to as their “high risk” “association with Americans during the Vietnam conflict,” the Vietnamese people’s independent cultural and economic interactions with western nations also explains some of the refugees’ familiarity with America upon their arrival.^104 American Studies scholar, Nhi T. Lieu, contributes critical context to certain Vietnamese refugees’ familiarity with American society that the Army attributed to their “high risk” association with America’s foreign intervention. As she writes in her 2011 book, The American Dream in Vietnamese, many Vietnamese people “who grew up with both French and American cultural influences adopted the ‘bourgeois’ character that became part of their identity.^^105 Vietnamese people living in Saigon and other southern cities started their American acculturation long before 1975 as they consumed Western “material culture in the form of popular icons, music, art, film, and literature.”^106 This exposure to western culture contributed to the development of urban (and suburban) Vietnamese-American identities that challenged “communism and its rural, peasant associations.”^107 As a result of South Vietnam’s French and American capitalist market legacy, the Vietnamese people the Army considered “high risk” were already familiar with American attitudes and lifestyle when they arrived at FIG in 1975. Yet this

^103 Kelly, From Vietnam to America, 56-57.
^106 Ibid, 5.
^107 Ibid, 5.
familiarity with western culture would only have been developed in Vietnamese urban upper class and many of the Cambodians, Northern-Vietnamese, and other lower class refugees would have lacked this familiarity. As Army and other IATF personnel received the unexpectedly heterogeneous refugee population, they developed additional cultural education programs to help make up for some of the refugees’ lack of familiarity with American life.

The Army’s After Action Report for Operation New Life/New Arrivals, reinforces Gail Paradise Kelly’s interpretation that the refugee population’s diverse background was more than just a result of the IATF’s last-minute planning.\textsuperscript{108} The diversity in the refugee population’s ethnic makeup, language ability, and occupational background signals that Vietnamese and Cambodian people took advantage of American government programs to leave their war torn region for new opportunities in America. Specifically, the presence of Northern Vietnamese refugees at FIG and that “high risk” Vietnamese people made up only a minority of the population reveals that Operation New Life and New Arrivals lacked clear goals and a predetermined plan. Furthermore, what the IATF intended for Operation New Arrivals was shaped by refugees who wanted to flee Vietnam and found a way into an immigration program they were not intended to participate in. The presence of refugees who were not intended to immigrate to America through Operation New Life/New Arrivals indicates that even though the IATF attempted to shape how the refugees first accessed the U.S., the refugees’ will to escape the Vietnamese peninsula directed how Operation New Life played out.

Recognizing that Operation New Life and Operation New Arrivals did not go as the IATF planned because of the immigrants own efforts reinstates many refugees’ autonomy that has been taken away by historical narratives that paint this refugee population as simply passive

\textsuperscript{108} Kelly, \textit{From Vietnam to America}, 22-23.
allies and intimates of the U.S. military. Closely examining refugee populations’ qualities indicates that the operation was a humanitarianism refugee mission, an evacuation of allied politicians, business people, and military personnel, as well as an immigration wave for indirectly involved civilians.

III. HOW DID THE IATF ADJUST AND DEAL WITH REALITY?

U.S. military forces officially left Vietnam and ended America’s direct role in the war on March 29, 1973.\textsuperscript{109} Two years later in the summer of 1975, America was stuck in an economic recession while the country continued to recover from emotional and physical damage inflicted from America’s participation in the Vietnam War. Within this context, admitting Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees was not a popular initiative with the American public. According to an article published by the Pew Research Center, as of May 1975, only 37% of Americans supported a Vietnamese refugee immigration program while 49% opposed refugees entering the U.S., and the remaining 14% were indifferent.\textsuperscript{110} As a result of public resentment of the refugee resettlement operation and the Vietnam War in general, there was pressure on the IATF to relocate the refugees efficiently and in a way that did not interfere with American life too drastically.


Public resentment towards the IATF’s operation became very clear as many Americans voiced their opposition to the refugee operation and the refugees’ relocation to America in general. One women in Arkansas voiced her opposition to the refugees as she is quoted in the May 12, 1975 edition of *Newsweek* stating, “they say it’s colder here than in Vietnam. With a little luck, maybe all of those Vietnamese will get pneumonia and die.” Furthermore, a letter written by Gim Shek in 1975 that was included in Perla Guerroro’s 2016 ethnic studies examination on the racialization of Vietnamese refugees in Arkansas reveals how American opposition to the refugees was motivated by a few interconnected reasons. As Shek’s May 5, 1975 letter to his senator, David Pryor, states:

> Our involvement and loss in Vietnam to shame us; the influx of thousands of foreigners to smother our economic growth; [the refugee situation] is making a sucker out of us. Those foreigners coming here are not bringing their hearts. They will eventually bring over more of their kind, and won’t be satisfied until they have brought over part of the “Country.”… We think poor management [in Washington] is going to put us out of business as a nation of might.

Shek’s letter reveals how in addition to fearing that refugees would become living reminders of America’s lost war and would strain the economy, some Americans opposed the refugee operation because they felt threatened by Asian people immigrating to their country. Even though much of it is identifiable as racism, opposition to refugee resettlement in the U.S., exemplified by Shek’s letter, indicates that there was public pressure on the IATF to minimize

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113 Ibid, 240.
the refugees’ potential to strain the economy and stand as a reminder Americans of the horror and failure of the Vietnam War.

Once the IATF realized that the refugees they had evacuated were not just “high risk” Vietnamese people like they had planned, the refugee resettlement program adjusted to accommodate refugees who were not familiar with English and as a result were less likely to become employed. According to Kelly, the resettlement took a strategic shift on April 25, 1975, when the Task Force realized that they were resettling a population of refugees that was different from the one they had intended to help. As she puts it, on April 25th, “it was clear that the immigrants could not be placed in the United States directly.”114 At this point, the IATF understood that it had to wake up and deal with reality. The refugees accumulating at the U.S.’s military bases on Guam, on Wake Island, and in the Philippines were not the refugees the IATF anticipated, and it was time to adjust the plan for the refugees before they arrived in America without support or a safety net. As Kelly argues:

it was after 25 April that Camp Pendleton was opened in California to take up the processing of immigrants that could not be handled on Guam. After Pendleton, centers were established at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida and Fort Chaffee in Arkansas. As of 31 May, Fort Indian Town Gap, Pennsylvania became the fourth and last center to open on U.S. soil. These centers existed because given the unanticipated nature of the immigration, time would be needed to find Americans willing to take responsibility for the immigrants, to do security checks, and to prepare Vietnamese culturally to live in this country.115

114 Kelly, From Vietnam to America (1977), 57.
115 Ibid.
The IATF dealt with reality by using the four military bases to buy themselves time by separating the unexpected group of refugees from the rest of American society until they could minimize the potential risk of refugees not finding jobs and irritating Americans with their lack of cultural fluency. As shown by the refugee’s expedited resettlement described in “A Tragedy: From Vietnam to America” and the fact that 10,000 refugees were able to immigrate to America without a sponsor, if the evacuation had only brought “high risk” refugees to America, the roles of the four military bases would be smaller or unnecessary.\textsuperscript{116} First, the IATF’s resettlement strategy utilized sponsorship to initially protect the refugees from unemployment and to diffuse the refugees across the country in an attempt to minimize the risks of widespread refugee unemployment as well as the social risk of introducing a foreign population into American society. Second, the IATF and specifically the Army’s 4th Psychological Operations Group attempted to acculturate the refugees using films and newspaper media in order to limit the amount of friction surrounding their immigration. Lastly, the IATF tried to limit the social risk of bringing 130,000 Vietnamese people to the U.S. by painting the refugee evacuation and resettlement as ethical humanitarian actions.

1. Refugee Sponsorship: Geographic Diffusion and a Non-Welfare Safety Net

Operation New Arrivals’ sponsorship program resettled the refugees with partnering families and organizations such as churches to ensure that the refugees would have a supportive community safety net from which to start their new lives in America. The IATF’s priority to limit the amount of strain the refugees could put on America’s recession-era society was evident on June 1975 when FIG’s most senior civilian leader, Richard E. Friedman, announced, that “the

\textsuperscript{116} Chan, ed., \textit{The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation}, 99-115; Kelly, \textit{From Vietnam to America} (1977), 151.
objective of this program is to move out people to settle as quickly as possible, to become productive American Citizens.”\textsuperscript{117} Later on, Friedman mentioned, that the best way to reach the operation’s goal is to find American “sponsors who are willing to assume the moral responsibility for providing food, clothing, shelter, educational opportunities, medical and the like.”\textsuperscript{118} As Friedman makes clear in his statement, the goal of sponsorship was to provide a supportive environment for the refugees to begin their lives in America.\textsuperscript{119} But later in his statement, Friedman mentions that sponsorship is also intended to prevent the worst case scenario, “to have a refugee become a welfare recipient shortly after leaving Fort Indiantown Gap.”\textsuperscript{120} According to Friedman, there would be “nothing more divisive” than having refugees leaving FIG and becoming dependent on welfare, which indirectly implies that the Army and IATF leaders positioned at FIG not only wanted to help the refugees be successful in America, but also wanted to avoid further divisiveness in America, especially considering Operation New Arrival’s proximity to the largely unpopular Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{121} Public statements from both Army refugee centers’ civilian leaders reveals that Operation New Arrivals intended to use sponsorship to achieve the goals of helping the refugees while also avoiding additional divisiveness and resentment of the American military that could come from the refugees becoming welfare recipients.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{117} “Press Conference 17 June 1975,” in “Historian’s Background Material Files.” USAHEC.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{122} Richard Friedman’s counterpart, Civilian Coordinator McDonald, who was responsible for the Army’s other refugee processing center at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas agreed with Friedman that unsuccessful sponsorship would lead to unemployed Vietnamese refugees. McDonald thought unemployed refugees was the worse case scenario because it both put the refugees in bad situation were they would not be able to feed or house themselves and because unemployed refugees going becoming dependent on government aid could make the public resent the
In May 1975, when the refugees resettlement camps were established, 8.6% of the American work force was unemployed, nearly double the 4.6% unemployment rate from May 1974.\textsuperscript{123} The May 12, 1975 edition of \textit{Times} magazine pointed out that unemployment was particularly high in the communities surrounding the resettlement centers and “residents feared that the bulk of the refugees would be settled permanently in their communities.”\textsuperscript{124} But “apprehensions eased after the State Department promised that the Vietnamese would be dispersed throughout the country.”\textsuperscript{125} The \textit{Times} article highlights American’s fear that Indochinese refugees would take precious American jobs. This fear was a major roadblock for the IATF that significantly shaped how the refugees would be resettled. Furthermore, the article reveals how Americans were skeptical of America’s Cold War maneuvers and sympathetic with the triumphant Vietnamese Communist. Even Margery Swann of the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker non-government organization known for pacifism and aiding migrants, did not want the Indochinese refugees to resettle in America for the long term. Speaking for the refugees even more, seeing them as even more of a burden. McDonald makes this point clear in a speech he gave at Fort Chaffee when President Ford visited the base on August 10, 1975. According to McDonald’s speech the Operation New Arrivals personnel at Fort Chaffee “strive for rapid resettlement and for high quality [sponsorship] placements, too,” because, “poor quality could diminish, not sustain, the support of the American people.” With the dual objectives of helping the refugees find new lives in America and also keeping the refugees off welfare, the IATF at Fort Chaffee and FIG carefully screened who could become a sponsor and where refugees would be sponsored. Donald G MacDonald, “Speech for Presidential Visit” August 9, 1975, Box 20, Record Group 319, The National Archives Record Administration at College Park, (for now on referred to as NARA).


\textsuperscript{124} “Refugees: A Cool and Wary Reception,” \textit{Times}, May 12, 1975, accessed April 1, 2018 \url{http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,917419,00.html}.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
Quaker aid organization, Swann is quoted in *Time* stating, “what we hope is that the refugees here, when they see things calm down over there [in Vietnam], will go home to rebuild their lives.” The unpopular nature of America’s war in Vietnam and the state of the U.S. economy put the IATF in a difficult situation in which they had to resettle nearly 130,000 refugees into a country that largely opposed the refugees’ admission and the war that caused their displacement.

The IATF used sponsorship to ensure that they did not saddle one American community with a concentrated burden of employing or providing welfare for a large number of the refugees. The IATF efforts to avoid dumping a mass of Vietnamese people in one area of the United State is furthered contextualized by a letter sent on June 2, 1975 from Brigadier General (BG) Cannon who was stationed at the FIG refugee resettlement center to BG Todd stationed at United States Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) Headquarters in Fort McPherson, Georgia. The letter reflects a meeting that occurred on May 28, 1975 between FIG’s IATF leaders, Pennsylvania’s Governor Shapp, and a group of “local politicians.” The June, 1975 letter reveals American’s anxieties that the immigrating population of refugees would invade their communities, take their jobs, and consume all of their government funding. This anti-refugee sentiment is indicated BG Cannon paraphrases the questions that the elected officials, noting that “most of them concerned the ultimate size of the refugee population and their length of stay,” but they also asked, “the type of disease expected, how much money did they [the refugees] have, would they be distributed around the country and not force fed to the local communities?” These questions reveal Americans’ apprehensions towards the refugees and that the members of the Task Force like BG Cannon wanted to alleviate and avoid exacerbating these anxieties at all

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127 “June 2, 1975 Letter from BG Cannon to BG Todd.” Box 15, Record Group 319, NARA.
costs. Furthermore, in hindsight the Task Force’s goal to avoid “force feeding” all the refugees to a certain community can be seen as a driving goal of the resettlement.

Scholars Kelly and Friedman describe how Operation New Arrivals’ resettlement strategy and in particularly sponsorship responded to American’s concerns such as those expressed by Shek’s letter and the politicians who spoke with BG Cannon. First, sponsorship attempted to spread the refugees across the country in order to limit the new American’s ability to disrupt American communities. As Kelly phrases it, at FIG, “camp management, the arm of the IATF, pursued a policy of diaspora. Resettlement was aimed at preventing large clusters of Vietnamese, Cambodians, or Laotians from building up in any large area in the country.”

Furthermore, this sponsorship strategy was chosen in an attempt to minimize the refugees drag on a single town or city’s job market. Furthermore according to Friedman, the sponsorship system had the added benefit of hiding the refugees’ militant background as collaborators and leaders of the Vietnam War as it directed refugees to lower class jobs across the country. As he writes in 2013, acculturation on the refugee processing bases and sponsorship funneled the refugees to “enter America’s neighborhoods as authentic and enthusiastic Vietnamese immigrants,” rather than, “American intimates whose very presence would testify to both the content and failure of American foreign policy and state building in Vietnam.”

Operation New Arrivals’ sponsorship system controlled where and how the refugees entered society. There was no one path the refugees took to America, rather the refugees were sent out separately all over the country. Rather than providing refugees freedom to create a new life in America, Operation New Arrivals sponsorship program initially shaped refugees lives as Vietnamese-Americans.

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129 Friedman, *Covert Capital*, 175.
Additionally, Perla M. Guerrero’s 2016 article, “Yellow Peril in Arkansas,” describes the experience Vietnamese Refugees brought to the refugee-processing center at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas during Operation New Arrivals. Guerrero finds that the refugees who had medical skills were quickly funneled off base and sponsored in American communities who needed medical professionals. But other Vietnamese refugees who did not have the desired medical skills were left behind and had to continue to trudge through a sponsorship immigration program that forced some to wait for up to six months in order to be processed and sponsored by American communities. This specific episode at Fort Chaffee shows how sponsorship was used at Army refugee centers not only to help the refugees establish new lives in America but also to solve other problems such as Arkansas’ 1970s need for doctors and nurses.

From Geographic Diffusion to Ethnic Enclaves

Despite the sponsorship programs’ goal of equally distributing the refugees across the country, Kelly points out that soon after the refugee resettlement camp at FIG closed in late 1975, refugees had begun to move closer to one another which effectively established distinct ethnic enclaves, “Little Saigons.” The actual story of the refugees’ journey through Operation New Life/Arrivals goes beyond the refugees’ initial sponsorships as refugees relocated to Little Saigons in the late 1970s. The secondary movement after sponsorship resettlement shows that Operation New Life sponsorship was not what the refugees wanted.

Understanding the refugees’ actual journey to the U.S. reveals their own autonomy and balances the role of the U.S. government agencies such as the Army and Navy as neither complete saviors nor completely selfish imperialists. As shown by their communications with the

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131 Kelly, *From Vietnam to America*, 203.
public, the IATF and specifically the U.S. Army had more than one goal regarding Operation New Arrivals. Yet presenting the refugees journey as clean, drama-free, and direct, omits the efforts of the refugees and effectively allows the U.S. military to use the refugee operations as a publicity maneuver to heal (or at least protect) their public perception after the Vietnam War.

2. Acculturation

At the Fort Indiantown Gap resettlement center, the Army’s 4th Psychological Operations Group disseminated important announcements and information as well as lessons for how the refugees should live their new lives in America. Their predominant publication was a daily newspaper called *Dat Lanh (Good Land)* but the group also created “signs, posters, pamphlets, and educational materials,” for the refugees.\(^{132}\) Today, *Dat Lanh* can be interpreted as the Army’s instructions for how the group of refugees should live in America. Notably, articles in *Dat Lanh* prompt the refugees to act in ways that could help the IATF move towards their goals of preventing refugee unemployment and reducing the amount of public hostility towards refugees in America. Specifically, *Dat Lanh* articles contribute to the operation’s objectives as they encourage the refugees to adapt to American ways of life, get a job even if it is in a less prestigious position than the refugee is accustomed to, and further to not irritate their American sponsors.

First, *Dat Lanh* encourage the refugees to mimic a white middle class American lifestyle as articles inform their refugee readers how ideal Americans spend their time. The June 24th 1975 edition of *Dat Lanh*’s section titled “Experience of Living in America,” states, “Sundays are family days for all Americans. A father can hold a camp or a picnic at the countryside so that

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\(^{132}\) “4th Psyop Leaves,” *Dat Lanh (Good Land)*, December 1, 1975.
his household could enjoy the fresh air. Otherwise, they can go to Foot-Ball, Tennis or Baseball games. While ardent believers go to church, the less earnest ones would rather stay later in beds.  

133 This advice column depicts American customs as institutions that are powered by patriarch family structures, western religion, and competitive sports. Of course it doesn’t get anymore stereotypically American than Christianity, strong father figures, and Sunday Night Football. But for the Vietnam War refugees who immigrated to the U.S. and read *Dat Lanh (Good Land)* at the Army’s Fort Indiantown Gap refugee-processing center, the section could be interpreted as suggesting that they should leave their old ways behind for a hyper-American lifestyle.

The feature’s byline credits the source of the advice as “a group of Viet Nationals in the United States,” but the Army’s 4th Psychological Operations Group published and controlled the paper. Even though *Dat Lanh* includes useful job postings, movie times and other base announcements, sections like “Easy English lesson for the Refugees,” and other cultural education pieces indicate that the military wanted the refugees to conform to certain American habits and were using the camp newspaper to help reach this objective.  

134 *Dat Lanh*’s version of an ideal American Sunday is an unsurprising rendition of American stereotypes, but the newspaper is notable because it was Army sponsored and represents how the military believed new Americans should act.

Second, the Army’s 4th Psychological Operations Group used *Dat Lanh* to push refugees to get jobs even of a lower status than their previous position in Vietnam. *Dat Lanh* articles such one titled “A Coin has Two Sides,” makes an effort to limit the number of refugees from becoming dependent on U.S. government welfare by encouraging the refugees to take any job

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133 “Experience of Living in America: Privacy,” *Dat Lanh (Good Land)*, June 24, 1975.
134 *Dat Lanh (Good Land)*, June 14, 1975.
they can get. The article reminds refugees that their top priority upon resettlement should be to find a job and become independent of their sponsor and government aid. As the article states, “Sometimes the refugees does not have a skill that is readily marketable in the Untied States. He is, then, obligated to follow the path of the American unskilled worker.” The article echoes the American Dream legend as it continues and states that for the refugee, “it is important that he take any work he can find, just to get started.” “A Coin has Two Sides,” ends by laying out a promising example of how the refugees should act in America. According to the article, a healthy attitude for refugees is one that accepts work in the U.S. no matter the refugees’ previous work experience:

It is best characterized by the man who wrote in saying he had to go to work with his hands because his background as a army officer could not be translated into a career in the United States. “But,” he wrote, “I am working. I am taking care of my family. I am happy.” He is also studying. And he has a dream.

The example laid out by Dat Lanh is similar to an American cultural trope called the “model minority” that has been placed upon Asian American immigrants by American society. The former Vietnamese Army officer quoted in the article exemplifies how the IATF hoped the refugees would act like the perfect American immigrant by working hard and not complaining about having to take a worse job in America than the refugee had in Vietnam. The way Dat Lanh encouraged the Indochinese refugees to get jobs as soon as possible even if it was only unskilled laborer positions, reveals how the refugee operation prioritized attempts to avoid societal disruption and from increasing unemployment in the U.S.

135 Dat Lanh (Good Land), September 16, 1975, 1-2.
136 Ibid, 2.
137 Ibid.
The Army utilized more than just paper media to acculturate refugees and according to 4th Psychological Operations Group’s last edition of *Dat Lanh*, the group also facilitated daily film screenings of popular American films such as Disney’s “Robin Hood,” (1973) and Universal Pictures’ “The Sting” (1973). One pamphlet given to the refugees titled *Information Guide for New Arrivals at Ft. Indiantown Gap, Pa.* IATF, emphasizes the importance of these films within the IATF’s education program. The value the Army saw in American films as cultural education resources is made clear on the eighteenth page in a section titled, “Education Services Available,” as the pamphlet writes to the refugees, “films will introduce you to America. We will explain through motion pictures, the working of our government, how laws, are made, how our officials, are elected, and what it means to be part of America.”

**CONCLUSION: What Happened after 1975?**

Since Operation New Arrivals concluded in the last days of 1975, the sheer number of refugee resettlements in the United States has fluctuated based on changes in the economy, the job market, the number of displaced refugees, politics, and the sympathies of Americans towards refugee groups. (Fig. 4) As shown by the first data point on Figure 4, during the Cold War, the U.S. would admit large numbers of refugees fleeing communist persecution only to quickly reduce the total number in subsequent years. Even though the resettlement of Hungarian, Cuban, and Vietnamese refugees to the U.S. during the Cold War indicates that the United States was motivated to help refugees fleeing communism. The Cold War era refugees arriving in America.

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138 “Movie Schedule,” *Dat Lanh (Good Land)*, June 14, 1975.
139 “Task Force New Arrivals VIP Visitor Folder,” in Vietnam Refugee Project Papers at USAHEC.
made the U.S. appear like the moral “good guys” in comparison to the communist and Soviet states the refugees fled.

In the twenty-first century, both the background of refugees seeking safety in America and the way the American public has reacted to the refugees has changed. Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks when nineteen Middle-Eastern men hijacked four commercial planes and used them as weapons against America, refugees have begun to be seen as a potential national security threat. During President Donald Trump’s presidency, fears that admitting refugees from the Middle East would effectively bring terrorists to the U.S. has resulted in a drastic fall in the number of yearly Muslim refugees admitted as well as the total number of refugees. According to an Economist article published on April 21, 2018, “from 2013 to 2017, Muslims made up 41% of admitted refugees. But more than halfway through the current fiscal year, they make up just 17%.” Furthermore, not only is the proportion of Muslim refugees decreasing but the total number of admitted refugees is also declining. (Fig. 4) The yearly total of refugees admitted to the U.S. was relatively steady from 2008 to 2016, staying between around 60,000 and 85,000. But in 2017, the total fell to 53,716 and if refugee admissions continue at 2018’s current pace, the Economist forecasts that only 20,800 refugees will be admitted. The drastic decline in refugees resettling to the U.S. can be attributed to growing nationalism in the U.S. and xenophobic fears that refugees (particularly those fleeing warfare in the Middle East) aim to conduct terrorist attacks on Americans. In 1975, the U.S. government admitted 146,158 total refugees and Operation New Arrivals portrayed many of them as anticommunists ready to work hard and work hard to adopt American culture. Comparing the 1975 refugee operations to

today’s refugee policy reveals how the U.S. government has switched from taking advantage of refugees to further national security goals and defame America’s communist enemies, to vilifying refugees as potential terrorists committed to attacking the United States.

Not only did the 1975 refugee evacuation and resettlement operations leave a lasting mark on the refugees and the racial makeup of America, the humanitarian missions also have a lasting legacy in the way the U.S. military functions, today. Examining Operation New Life from a macro level, Lipman argues that “Operation New Life emphasized the military’s logistical expertise; its ability to ‘save’ Vietnamese men, women, and children; and the humanitarian possibilities of a large volunteer force. While not the intention at the time, the military’s deep involvement with the Vietnamese refugee crisis expanded the scope of the U.S. military’s operations and redefined how the U.S. military repositioned itself as the go-to organization in humanitarian crises.” The Army’s humanitarian actions in 1975 helped recuperate the U.S. military’s public image damaged by the unpopular Vietnam War. Furthermore, today, the U.S. military frequently conducts humanitarian operations around the world.

From the very first stages of the United States’ evacuations of South Vietnam things did not go as planned. South Vietnam’s sudden retreat down the Indochinese Peninsula and the North Vietnamese Communist forces subsequent advance occurred at a shocking pace in the last weeks of April 1975. But it was not until South Vietnam’s President Thieu resigned on April 21, 1975 that a Communist victory of Vietnam appeared imminent. With only a limited amount of time, the U.S. military began evacuating Vietnamese people who were at “high risk” of Communist retribution because they had worked for the South Vietnamese government, the U.S. military, or American companies. With the goal of evacuating the estimated 130,000 “high risk”

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141 Lipman, “‘A Precedent Worth Setting...’ Military Humanitarianism,” 155.
Vietnamese who had worked directly with Americans, the evacuation took place by boat, airplane, and helicopter. Yet, the U.S. evacuation criteria failed to be enforced or systematically implemented. A situation that was made worse as the Communist came closer to capturing Saigon and the evacuation became increasingly chaotic and rushed.

As a result of the vague evacuation criteria as well as the circumstances of the evacuation, ultimately the U.S. military evacuated a population of refugees that only partially resembled the population that the Americans had intended to help. Facing the unintended group of refugees and a United States that was in the middle of an economic recession, the Interagency Task Force on Indochinese Refugees utilized four military bases in the Continental U.S. to separate the refugees from American society so the IATF could control how and where the refugees immigrated. Though the evacuation operation did not go as intended, the IATF adjusted their plan and utilized the four bases as holding centers were the refugees were prepared to enter American society and in particularly trained to be ready to get a job that sponsorship would position them for. Eventually, the refugees would migrate away from the diffuse locations that the IATF’s sponsorship program placed them in.

The IATF’s refugee resettlement operation, Operation New Arrivals, was organized to make up for the U.S. military’s mistakes during the 1975 evacuation of Vietnam that led to the arrival of a diverse and unexpected population in America. Despite the evacuation and the resettlement operation failures, the evacuation and resettlement of Vietnamese refugees blazed a path to the U.S. that later waves of Indochinese refugees such as the famous boat people would take to America. Even though the April 1975 evacuation, Operation New Life that brought the unexpected refugees to America, and Operation New Arrivals that resettled the refugees within
America, were all constantly creating new plans to make up for earlier mistakes, the refugee missions established the human foundation of today’s Vietnamese American communities.
Figure 1: Illustration of the Army’s role within Operation New Arrivals (“Historian’s Background Material Files,” USAHEC)
Figure 2: Army Operation New Arrivals Command Relationships Chart as of May 22, 1975 ("Historian's Background Material Files," USAHEC)
Figure 3: Refugee Population in Guam’s Orote Point “Tent City” from May 1, 1975 to June 30, 1975. The refugee population at Orote Point quickly decreased as typhoons began to threaten the Guam.
Figure 4: Yearly total of refugees admitted to the United States since 1975.

Dataset from the U.S Department of State: Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration’s Refugee Processing Center accessed on April 21, 2018. Graph created by author using Microsoft Excel. Unfortunately for the study of pre Indochinese refugees, statistics on the number of refugees relocated to the U.S. before 1975 is not easily available.
Works Cited

Primary Sources:

Dat Lanh (Good Life) Newspaper Collection at the National Guard Museum of Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania National Guard Military Museum, Fort Indiantown Gap, PA, USA.

Bound collection of copied Dat Lanh Newspapers.


Secondary Sources:


Friedman, Andrew. Covert Capital: Landscapes of Denial and the Making of U.S. Empire in the Suburbs of Northern Virginia. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013. This book is helpful because it discusses the CIA’s role in Vietnam War refugee resettlement and how Vietnamese Refugees resisted their sponsored settlement locations in favor of moving to the Washington DC area in order to live closer to their American military connections. Within this context, Prof. Friedman describes how the U.S. military used the processing camps to transform their former partners in the Vietnam War from “intimate to immigrant.” (P. 176) All in all, Covert Capital, provides some insightful analysis of refugee resettlement inside the frame of the North Virginia area American imperialist landscape.


This report written by the Army’s Historical office describes Project New Arrivals which encompassed refugee processing at FIG as well as the other three bases involved in the operation. I just found this PDF document and have not yet read through the entire three
hundred and three-page document but it should be an incredibly helpful resource as it describes the entire program, processes, as well problems faced by personnel at FIG. Already, I have found a picture of an FIG military police officer distributing copies of the Dat Lanh newspaper to refugees in an effort to disseminate camp announcements.


I was originally drawn to my thesis topic after reading Nguyen's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Sympathizer which portrays the trials and tribulations of a Viet Kong double agent who’s dual consciousness symbolizes the experiences of immigrants who feel both American and foreign at the same time. (Nothing Ever Dies, p. 53) When he was young, Nguyen immigrated into the U.S. through the Fort Indiantown Gap refugee-processing operation. Today, Nguyen is a professor of English and American Studies at USC. His book Nothing Ever Dies is a nonfictional analysis of how the Vietnam War is remembered in culture and by different groups. It is helpful for contextualizing my thesis as it discusses how the military as well as film and art prioritize remembering a version of the Vietnam War that prioritizes American interests while down grading the role of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese refugees.


Hinnershitz’s article is very brief and provides only a surface level overview the history of refugees at FIG.


This resource from the Migration Policy Institute has been helpful for my research because it provides an empirical sketch of Vietnamese-American’s population and socioeconomic measurable over the last fifty years.

**Popular Press Sources:**


http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20150701_40_years_after_the_fall_Vietnamese_reunite.html - 1WC4yu3dvwD7yh3e.99
