EXCURSUS I

Barry Rubin on 
Vietnam Refugees

A little over a year ago Communist forces launched their last major offensive in South Vietnam. Cities surrendered, the South Vietnamese Army panicked and shattered, and thousands of refugees fled the advancing troops and the battlefield. The decade-long U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia was ending in disaster. The collapse came with surprising swiftness, even for those who had long predicted it. There had been little preparation for the ensuing refugee problem. In eleven days, however, some 140,000 people, including 1,200 Cambodians, were taken out of the country by plane and ship.

U.S. policy gave priority to "high risk" Vietnamese—those who, through their association with the Saigon Government or with the U.S. forces, had reason to fear for their safety under the new regime. The most publicized and controversial part of this program was "Operation Baby Lift," which took two thousand orphans (or those thought to be orphans) out of Vietnam. Even here, tragedy was present: A cargo plane loaded with children crashed on takeoff. Dozens were killed.

Harsh reactions and criticisms of the refugee program came from many sources. The Hanoi Government accused the U.S. of "kidnapping" people, while many Americans were fearful of taking in large numbers of war criminals and prostitutes. With the U.S. in an economic slump some wondered whether the refugees would take jobs away from American citizens.

There were press stories that some of the "orphans" had been given up by their mothers, convinced the children would have a better life in America. Indeed, some of the adoption efforts have been tied up in litigation because of the difficulty in documenting whether a particular baby's parents are still living. Some refugees—about 1,600 in all—decided they wanted to return home. There were clashes at the Guam transport camp before their return could be arranged.

Today, American memories of the Vietnam war have begun to fade. The absence of the old debates have been an especially noticeable feature of the current political campaigns. The South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, often the target of antiwar demonstrators, has been padlocked and shuttered. Even on the map that country has ceased to exist, with Communist proclamation of a unified country.

If the refugee resettlement program has not constantly been making its own headlines lately, it is due in large part to the success of religious and church groups that have taken most of the burden for solving the problems that have come up. For difficulties have not been lacking.

Ironically, the handling of the refugee problem here may be the only U.S. success story to come out of the war. Most of the refugees, whether "high risk" or not, come from South Vietnam's urban middle class. Of household heads, surveys show, 27.5 percent had university educations and 48 percent more had some secondary schooling. In terms of occupation 43 percent were white collar or professional, 40 percent were blue collar, and only 5 percent were peasants, the vocation of the vast majority of Vietnamese. About 40 percent are Catholic, eight times their proportion in the entire population. These figures profile the most anti-Communist sections of the population. There can be no doubt but that they left voluntarily and eagerly.

The refugees also form a very young group: 35 percent are 18-34 years old, while 46 percent are under 18. Overall they are a relatively skilled, urbanized, and flexible group: They are most likely to be able to adjust to the West because, among all Vietnamese, their life-style was closest to ours.

As the Vietnamese arrived in the U.S. last summer they were put into four quickly organized camps located on military installations. They were interviewed, given physical exams, briefed on life in America, and offered English lessons. Given the speed and innovation of this process, there was inevitably some confusion and inefficiency. A blistering report by Senator Edward Kennedy in June, 1975, charged:

The President's plan to evacuate "tens of thousands" of Vietnamese was, from the beginning, less of a plan than a vague intention, barely stated. As events have shown, whatever plan did exist, it was implemented badly, plagued with disorder and undertaken with little command control in the field. Moreover, events rapidly overtook whatever decisions were made.

One decision that was carried through was to move the Vietnamese out of the camps by the end of the year. In general this seemed a correct choice, aimed at normalizing, as rapidly as possible, lives that had been shattered by warfare and a traumatic flight. "I think they did a very good job getting the refugees out of the camps in seven months," says Matthew Mitchell, Program Director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees. At the time, though, he adds, the refugees did not fully understand the importance of the language training. Now, with their need to find jobs and dispersion around the country, more Vietnamese are participating in evening English classes.

There was also occasional friction between the government and the voluntary organizations involved in finding jobs and homes for the refugees. An official of the U.S. Catholic Conference, which helped over fifty thousand Vietnamese here, said: "We told the government at one point, 'Your interest is in one thing—clearing the camps. We're interested in another thing—resettling people.'"
Most of the work was actually done by groups like the Catholic Conference, Church World Service, Lutheran Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the (Jewish) United HIA Service. The plan for easing the transition period of resettlement was based on having sponsoring American families or institutions (usually church groups) help individual Vietnamese families. The private groups, with their connections across the nation, handled the job far better than the government. In fact, while Washington appropriated $500 per refugee, the voluntary, religious-related groups provided an additional $1,000 in donated time and services.

The second phase of the refugee programming is now in full swing. It is designed to help the Vietnamese toward “self-sufficiency,” toward full assimilation into American society. This task has been greatly simplified by the high motivation of the average refugee. Despite early misgivings, the great majority of them have proven hardworking and ambitious for advancement. Yet the U.S. is now facing its highest rate of unemployment since World War II. Actually, the Vietnamese have done better finding jobs than most people expected, with about 82 per cent of those considered employable able to find work.

The short-range problem is underemployment. A government survey shows that 40 per cent of the refugees are earning less than poverty-level incomes, although many are also receiving welfare or private assistance. Most of the Vietnamese have had to take jobs below their level of training and education. Language problems remain a serious barrier. Current emphasis of aid programs is, therefore, on bilingual education, vocational training, and upgrading job skills. The American Nursing Association, for example, has helped forty-five Vietnamese nurses obtain licenses and find jobs, another program seeks to do the same for 350 refugee doctors. Those with marketable skills do best. Vietnamese fishermen are being taught American techniques and set up in business. A group of textile workers is being trained on modern machinery in another part of the country. At the same time, the former South Vietnamese Ambassador to the U.S. is still unemployed, and General Ky, once one of South Vietnam’s most powerful figures, has failed in his attempts to become a college lecturer because of demonstrations against him.

Perhaps a more typical story is that of a former Vietnamese Navy captain. He was resettled in the Washington area last June and found a job for himself within a month, working as a cashier in a restaurant. His children are now in public school, working hard to master English, and he attends evening courses. Eventually, he hopes to get into a better paying job involving more skill, perhaps computer programming. Americans have been friendly, he says, but only a few ask him questions about life and war in Vietnam.

“Resettlement is far more than just having a job or having an income,” a relief official explains. Adjustment to radically different cultural styles is most difficult. Yet the Vietnamese refugees have made the first key decision in the process: They have no illusions about returning home, they have decided to stay here permanently.

Traditionally, immigrants to the U.S. have gone through a recurring pattern over three generations. The actual immigrants remain heavily influenced by the language, culture, and worldview of their native land; their children become fully Americanized, ashamed of their parents’ accents and quaint customs; the third generation rekindles its interest in its heritage, developing a sense of ethnic pride. Perhaps the Vietnamese refugees will also follow this cycle.

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**EXCURSUS II**

**Shinkichi Eto on Three Pessimistic Scenarios for Japan**

In blind optimism and in blind pessimism there is the possibility of disillusion and self-fulfilling prophesy. The balance between reckless optimism and paralyzing pessimism requires readiness to look at the facts, to accept their implications, and to make ready for the unforeseen. In Japan our economists have tended to be optimists, while political scientists have been plagued by visions of disaster that could suddenly loom on the horizon of international politics.

During the prospering 1960’s I was deeply disturbed by Japan’s great economic dependence on the United States, by its heavy reliance on Middle East energy resources, and by the vulnerabilities of the international economic system. Through those years Japan’s economists would not accept the possibility that Middle Eastern countries would reduce oil sales, that the United States would retreat to protectionism, or that anyone would gain from disturbing the elaborate interrelationships of the international economic system.

The economists were proven correct in their forecasts so far as the decade of the 1960’s was concerned. And, even though early in the 1970’s the United States waged its textile war against Japan, and the fourth Arab-Israeli war placed in jeopardy the security of Middle East energy resources, most Japanese economists still confidently predicted something like a 9.6 annual rate of GNP growth for the rest of the decade. Even in the face of quadrupling oil prices and the virulence of worldwide inflation and recession, most of Japan’s non-Marxist