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POLICY BRIEF

FROM REFUGEES TO AMERICANS: Thirty Years of Vietnamese Immigration to the United States

by Alicia Campi, Ph.D.*

"We did not come here the way other migrants came. They came to paradise to realize their personal dreams. We were like trees uprooted and planted in a foreign land."

Phung Minh Tien (BBC Vietnamese Service, April 28, 2005)

The 20th century is often called the "Age of the Uprooted."¹ A prime example of this "uprooting" is the Vietnamese refugee crisis which unfolded in the mid-1970s after the end of the Vietnam War. The crisis resulted in both the creation of the modern Vietnamese American community and a fundamental reformulation of U.S. refugee policy. The 1.2 million-strong Vietnamese American community reflects upon this dramatic historical journey in 2005, which marks ten years since the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam, and 30 years since the fall of the Saigon government, which initiated the 'first wave' of Vietnamese refugees. Moreover, Vietnamese Americans celebrate the fact that they have moved far beyond their refugee origins and become successful economic and political players in U.S. society.

Waves of Vietnamese Refugees

In 1975, in the closing days of the Vietnam War, about 130,000 Vietnamese who were generally high-skilled and well-educated, and who feared reprisals for their close ties to Americans, were airlifted by the United States government to bases in the Philippines, Wake Island, and Guam. They were later transferred to refugee centers in California, Arkansas, Florida, and Pennsylvania for up to six months of education and cultural training to facilitate their assimilation into their new society. Although

initially not welcomed by Americans (only 36 percent in a national poll favored Vietnamese immigration), President Gerald Ford signed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act of 1975, which granted the refugees special status to enter the country and established a domestic resettlement program. The bill was amended in 1977 under the sponsorship of Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) to permit refugees to adjust to a parolee status and later become permanent residents. In order to prevent "ghettoism"² by concentrating resettled Vietnamese in one geographic area, refugees were initially dispersed across the country.³ This deliberate scattering of the first influx of refugees did not last, as most eventually moved to California and Texas.

This first wave of refugees was followed by a second major exodus out of Vietnam that began in 1978 and lasted into the mid-1980s, totaling almost 2 million people (3 million if Laotians and Cambodians are included) who fled communist re-education camps and the 1979 Chinese invasion of Vietnam. This group of refugees swamped the neighboring Southeast Asian countries Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong – countries of 'first asylum'⁴ – at a rate that ranged from 2,000 to as many as 50,000 refugees per month. Thousands of these desperate asylum seekers fled Vietnam in rickety wooden boats and would become known as 'Boat People.' Overwhelmed

first-asylum countries resorted to expelling the by ordering the 7th Fleet to seek out vessels in distress in the South China Sea. His Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, told Congress in July 1979 that:

*We are a nation of refugees. Most of us can trace our presence here to the turmoil or oppression of another time and another place. Our nation has been immeasurably enriched by this continuing process. We will not turn our backs on our traditions. We must meet the commitments we have made to other nations and to those who are suffering. In doing so, we will also be renewing our commitments to our ideals.*⁵

However, it was evident that U.S. refugee policies, which had been created in the aftermath of World War II, were not adequate to handle the hundreds of thousands of Indochinese refugees seeking to enter the United States.

The Vietnamese Impact on U.S. Refugee Policy

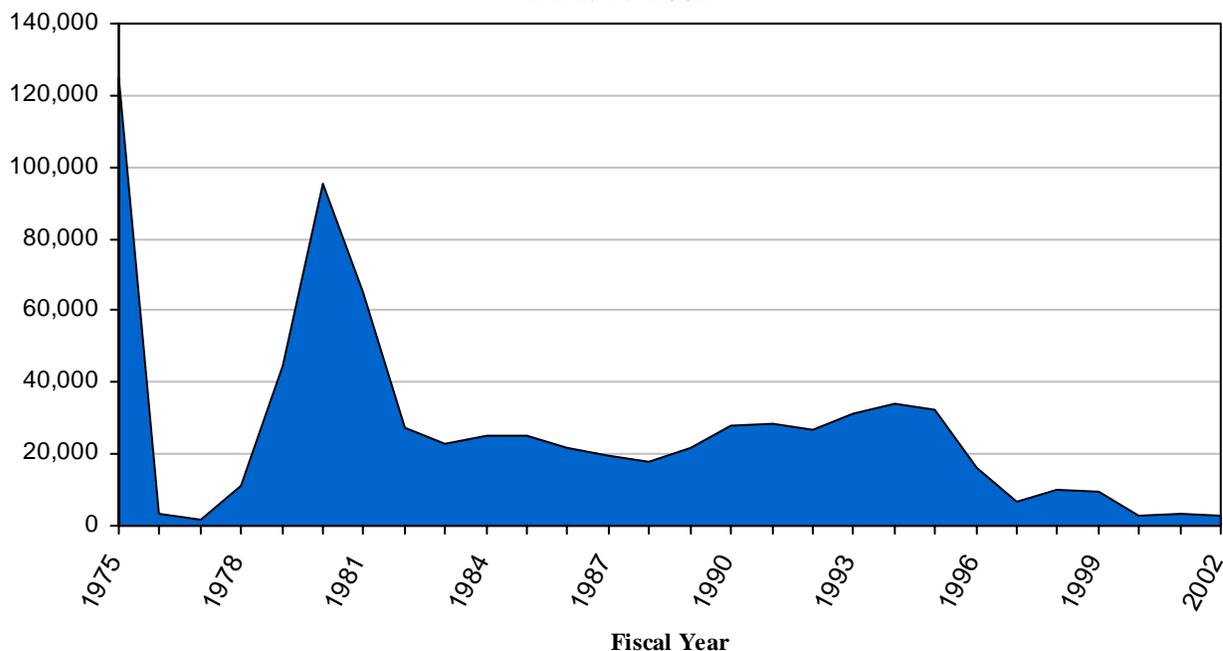
The United States was one of the original signatories of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the first modern international agreement on asylum, as well as the 1951 *United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*. Yet the U.S. government only addressed refugee issues through *ad hoc* legislation (for Hungarian and Cuban refugees, for instance).⁶ The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1952 contained no provisions expressly covering the resettlement of refugees. It wasn't until 1965 that Congress amended the INA to provide for the resettlement of refugees as a new category of 'conditional entrants,' defining 'refugee' only in terms of geography (from the Middle East) and political regime (from communist countries). Conditional entrants were capped at 17,400 annually. In

Boat People. President Jimmy Carter responded 1968, the United States acceded to the 1967 *United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, but continued to use its own definition of 'refugee.' Finally, in June 1980 U.S. law was brought into compliance with the international definition of 'refugee'.⁷

Recognizing that the Vietnamese refugee crisis was a world problem, the United Nations convened the First Geneva Conference on Indochinese Refugees in July 1979. The United States, together with the United Kingdom, Australia, France, and Canada, agreed to be a country of resettlement. In addition, first-asylum countries promised to continue receiving refugees and the communist Vietnamese government agreed to make efforts to stop illegal departures and to establish an Orderly Departure Program (ODP) under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The ODP involved interviews of released reeducation center detainees and their close family members in both the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, and in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. By the end of the program on September 30, 1994, the ODP allowed 167,000 Vietnamese former detainees (together with their family members) and 523,000 Vietnamese refugees, immigrants, and parolees to come to the United States. In addition, over 89,700 Amer-asian children with accompanying family members also were admitted.⁸ Another 18,000 Vietnamese were resettled under the 1996-2003 Resettlement Opportunity for Vietnamese Returnees (ROVR) for certain refugees still in asylum camps or recently returned to Vietnam. From 1975 through 2002, a total of 759,482 Vietnamese arrived in the United States as refugees.⁹ In 2005, refugee interviews are scheduled to resume in Vietnam and for 1,855 Vietnamese living since 1989 in the Philippines.

Vietnamese Refugee Arrivals to the United States FY 1975-2002



Source: Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, Southeast Asian American Statistical Profile. Washington, DC: 2004, p. 10.

Vietnamese Americans Today

“For the past 30 years, Vietnamese American contributions are often forgotten because Vietnamese Americans are mostly referenced in terms of a war. More than reminders of a war, we are a refugee community that has built new homes in a country of opportunities.”

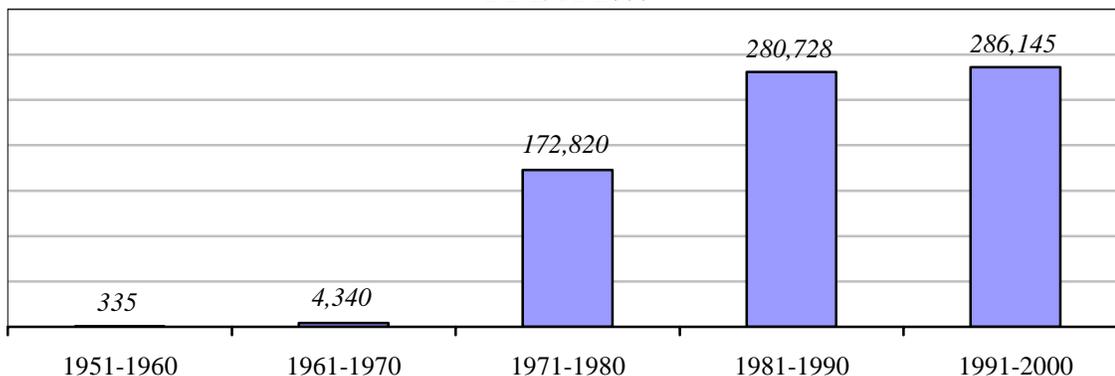
- Hung Nguyen¹⁰

As the history of refugee flight from Vietnam would suggest, Vietnamese Americans see family reunification and long waits for citizenship as the most significant immigration issues they face. But the community in the United States is equally concerned with its role in American society. In 2000, the 1.2 million-strong Vietnamese American community made up 10.9 percent of the Asian population, and was the fifth largest Asian immigrant group in the United States.¹¹ This represents a dramatic transformation in a relatively short span of time. Vietnamese immigrants were only identified separately by the Office of Immigration Statistics in the decade of the 1950s, when 335

were admitted as refugees and became Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs). This number had risen to 832,765 LPRs by 2003.¹²

Almost 40 percent of Vietnamese Americans live in California and another 12 percent in Texas. As of 2000, 44 percent of foreign-born Vietnamese had become U.S. citizens, the highest naturalization rate of all Asian groups,¹³ even though Vietnamese had the highest proportion (62 percent) of persons who spoke English less than “very well” at home. Although the Vietnamese community has a per capita income 40 percent lower than the national average, the median family income is the highest of all the Southeast Asian American refugee populations (\$46,929 according to the 2000 Census). Moreover, the Vietnamese have the lowest rate of receiving public assistance (10 percent) among Southeast Asian groups.¹⁴ Among all Asian ethnic groups, the Vietnamese are known to be especially anti-communist, very active politically, and more likely to vote Republican.¹⁵

**Immigrant Arrivals to the United States from Vietnam*
FY 1951-2000**



* Figures are for immigrants admitted to the United States for permanent residence, based on country of last residence. Source: Office of Immigration Statistics, Department of Homeland Security, 2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, September 2004 – Table 2, p. 14.

Carving Out Entrepreneurial Niches

The Vietnamese who came to the United States, especially in the second wave of migration, often had rudimentary education and skills, which made integration into their new homeland all the more challenging. With little English-language or technical training, Vietnamese exhibited great entrepreneurial spirit by finding niche occupations which could allow them to immediately earn money to support their families. According to the National Congress of Vietnamese Americans, businesses owned by Vietnamese Americans employed 97,035 people, had an annual payroll of \$1.1 billion, and generated annual receipts of \$9.3 billion in 2003.¹⁶ The Vietnamese revitalized and even re-invented some traditional job categories. Many first and second-generation Vietnamese are small business owners and have established restaurants or auto-repair shops. However, low-skilled Vietnamese in particular have had a pronounced impact on two industries: nail care and commercial fishing and shrimping.

Not Just Another Nail Salon

The nail salon business in the United States in 2003 was worth more than \$6 billion. The number of salons shot up from 32,674 in 1993 to 53,615 in 2003, and revenues have grown 67 percent in the past decade. Vietnamese quickly saw that nail shops could become profitable family businesses, and even males learned how to manicure and pedicure in order to support themselves. *Nails Magazine* credits the

Vietnamese with changing and re-defining the industry more than any other group, helping to increase the number of salons by 374 percent over the past decade, and making nail care a service that anyone from teens to working women can afford. Vietnamese Americans alone make up 37 percent of licensed technicians nationwide and dominate 80 percent of the industry in California.¹⁷

In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Charlie Ton has built a multi-million dollar empire with over 700 nail franchise locations (many located in Wal-Marts as ‘Regal Nails,’ which is growing at the rate of 125 per year). His headquarters has 50 employees in the nail supply division and 10,000 nail supply customers. Although most of Ton’s products are imported, he has begun manufacturing some goods in the United States to increase his profits. His franchisees are sold for \$50,000 apiece, making the total market value of the salons more than \$35 million. Now Ton is developing coffee shop franchises, which also may end up in Wal-Marts around the country.¹⁸

Commercial Fishing and ‘Big Shrimp’

Many Vietnamese immigrants to the United States in the late 1970s had been fishermen in Vietnam and so moved to fishing communities on the Texas Gulf Coast. The immigrants found work in low-paying jobs on fishing boats, cleaning fish, and in restaurant kitchens, tolerated because they took jobs that local workers did not want. But when Vietnamese

pooled their money to buy shrimp boats and began competing with the fishing businesses of native-born locals, hostilities arose, including armed clashes with hooded Klu Klux Klan members. Between 1979 and 1981 several Vietnamese-owned shrimp boats were burned in Galveston Bay and there were reports of snipers firing on Vietnamese boats.

The Southern Poverty Law Center employed the then-unorthodox strategy of using business laws as the legal foundation for a civil rights lawsuit on behalf of the Vietnamese fishermen against the Klan to prevent further intimidation and violence. The U.S. District Court in Houston, Texas, sided with the Vietnamese fishermen's claims under both Texas contract law and federal antitrust law (Section 1 of the Sherman Act).¹⁹ In addition, Congress passed a law in 1990 guaranteeing the fishing rights of resident aliens, which overturned California laws prohibiting non-citizens from operating commercial fishing boats.

Vietnamese American fishermen have learned the benefits of civic participation through their own organization, Vietnamese American Commercial Fishermen's Union, and through regional commercial trade organizations such as the Southern Shrimp Alliance. A turning point was reached when two Vietnamese Americans joined the board of the eight-state, 230-company shrimp-industry coalition in 2002. One of the new Vietnamese board members, Calvin Nguyen, commented: "We know there are different cultural and language barriers between American and Vietnamese fishermen, and we want to help. We need to be involved in our industry."²⁰

Today, Vietnamese Americans account for 45 to 80 percent of the shrimping industry in some areas, although less than one-half of one percent of the Vietnamese works in this occupation. It is estimated that 5,000 Vietnamese American immigrants shrimp in the Gulf of Mexico and many others are involved in longline tuna and inshore crab harvesting operations.²¹ Shrimp have evolved from a specialized delicacy to the most popular seafood in the United States. However, the Gulf Coast trawlers only catch 10 percent of the country's demand; the rest is imported. In recent years, Vietnamese-American fishermen have suffered, along with their Anglo

and Cajun counterparts, from the low price of imported shrimp. They all successfully joined together in an anti-dumping petition against six Asian and South American countries (including Vietnam), persuading the U.S. government to impose tariffs on imported shrimp in 2004 to protect the livelihoods of both Vietnamese American immigrant and native-born commercial shrimpers.²²

Moving Beyond a Tragic History

The tragic exodus of Vietnamese refugees in the post-Vietnam War era played a major role in the crafting of current U.S. immigration policies. The U.S. government, motivated by feelings of responsibility for a situation created by its own military intervention,²³ developed its new refugee policies in coordination with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This cooperation with the United Nations was recognition that refugee flows and the challenges faced by first-asylum countries are global issues. Because the numbers of Vietnamese refugees admitted to the United States were so large, the U.S. government had to establish an Office of Refugee Resettlement. This system later expanded in order to handle the resettlement of many other ethnic groups.

However, as with so many other immigrants, the Vietnamese have moved beyond defining themselves just as refugees in a new country. Over the past three decades, the Vietnamese have established their own businesses and profoundly influenced their local communities. Economically, Vietnamese Americans have energized niche markets such as nail care and shrimping. They are a politically active immigrant group and are increasingly building coalitions with others to confront common problems. To celebrate Vietnamese heritage, the Smithsonian Institution's Asian Pacific American Program is planning to open its first Vietnamese American Exhibit in Washington, DC in 2006, with financial support from Vietnamese immigrants and community organizations. It is evident that the Vietnamese, although a relatively new Asian immigrant group, are finding their own voice in their new homeland.

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Endnotes

¹ A. Lakshmana Chetty, "Resolution of the Problem of Boat People: The Case for a Global Initiative," *ISIL Year Book of International Humanitarian and Refugee Law*, World LII, 2001, pg. 1 (www.worldlii.org/int/journals/ISILYBIHRL/2001/8.html).

² William T. Liu, *Transition to Nowhere: Vietnamese Refugees in America*. Nashville, TN: Charter House, 1979.

³ *President's Interagency Task Force on Indochina Report*, December 15, 1975, pg. 11.

⁴ A concept in refugee resettlement circles which defines the "first nation" as the nation to which an individual refugee first arrives. "Asylum for Vietnamese Refugees," S6354, June 7, 1989.

⁵ Statement by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance before the Sub-Committee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the House Judiciary Committee, July 31, 1979.

⁶ Displaced Persons Act of 6/25/1948; Refugee Relief Act of 8/7/1953; Fair Share Refugee Act of 7/14/1960.

⁷ Any person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." *1967 United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, Art. 1.2, United Nations Treaty Series No. 8791, Vol. 606, pg. 267.

⁸ U.S. Department of State, "Refugee Admissions Program for East Asia," January 16, 2004 (www.state.gov/g/prm/rls/fs/2004/28212.htm).

⁹ Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, Table – Office of Refugee Resettlement. 1982-2001, 2003 (www.searac.org). FY 1975-1980 statistics from Ruben G. Rumbaut, "Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans." In Min Zhou & James V. Gatewood, eds., *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000, pg. 182. FY 1981-2000 statistics from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Annual Reports to Congress*. FY 2001 and 2002 statistics from U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, *Refugee Reports*, December 31, 2002.

¹⁰ Hung Nguyen, President of National Congress of Vietnamese Americans, NCVA Interviews on NPR's Talk of the Nation and CNN International, April 27, 2005 (www.ncvaonline.org/archive/pr_042705_NPR_CNN_Interviews.shtml).

¹¹ Terrance J. Reeves & Claudette E. Bennett, *We the People: Asians in the United States*, Census 2000 Special Reports, CENSR-17. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, December 2004, Figure 1, pg. 4.

¹² Office of Immigration Statistics, Dept. of Homeland Security, *2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, September 2004, pg. 14, Table 2, "Immigration by Region and Selected Country of Last Residence Fiscal Years 1820-2003." Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese parolees and refugees live permanently in the United States but are not counted as LPRs because they are not required to adjust to a permanent status.

¹³ *We the People*, pg. 9, Figure 6.

¹⁴ U.S. 2000 Census (www.census.gov/population/www/cps/cpsdef.html).

¹⁵ 48 percent of Vietnamese voters surveyed in the 2004 election were registered Republicans. Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, *The Asian American Vote 2004, A Report on the Multilingual Exit Poll in the 2004 Presidential Election*. New York, NY: 2005.

¹⁶ "Vietnamese Americans Fight for Freedom and Democracy," October 8, 2004 (www.ncvaonline.org/archive/pr_100804_Vietnamese_Freedom.html).

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¹⁸ Mukul Verma, "Regal Empire," *Business Report*, August 17, 2004.

¹⁹ Andrew Chin, "The KKK and Vietnamese Fishermen," University of North Carolina School of Law, 2001 (www.unclaw.com/chin/scholarship/fishermen.htm).

²⁰ John DeSantis, *The Courier*, October 23, 2002 (www.vietnamese-american.org/102802.html).

²¹ John DeSantis, "Promised land, imported seafood," *National Fisherman.com*, September 2004.

²² Radley Balko, "Big Shrimp: A Protectionist Mess," January 3, 2005 (www.cato.org/dailys).

²³ "Where is home? Indochina's Evacuees in the United States," *Indochina Chronicle*. Berkeley, CA: Indochina Resource Center, September 1975, pg. 3.