

A Warm or Cool Reception for a New Group of Immigrants?

Read the following excerpts, and answer the discussion questions that follow.

The President's News Conference of May 6, 1975

Q. Mr. President, you have been reported as being "damn mad" about the adverse reaction of the American people to the Vietnamese refugees. I would like to ask you, how do you explain that reaction? What in your judgment is the cause of that?

THE PRESIDENT. Mr. Lisagor (Peter Lisagor, Chicago Daily News), I am primarily very upset, because the United States has had a long tradition of opening its doors to immigrants from all countries. We are a country built by immigrants from all areas of the world, and we have always been a humanitarian nation. And when I read or heard some of the comments made a few days ago, I was disappointed and very upset.

Q. Could I follow that and ask you why, in your judgment, is there such a widespread adverse reaction to this?

THE PRESIDENT. I understand the attitude of some. We have serious economic problems. But out of the 120,000 refugees who are either here or on their way, 60 percent of those are children. They ought to be given an opportunity. Only 35,000 heads of families will be moved into our total society.

Now, I understand people who are concerned with our economic problems. But we have assimilated between 50 and 100,000 Hungarians in the mid-fifties, we have brought into this country some 500 to 600,000 Cubans. They have been good citizens, and we ought to welcome these people in the same way. And despite our economic problems, I am convinced that the vast majority of Americans today want these people to have another opportunity to escape the probability of death, and therefore, I applaud those who feel that way.¹

Trong and Thanh Nguyen Settle in America

We landed on the huge boat, the *Pioneer Contender*. I had mixed emotions. I felt that we were going to heaven—the United States. But I already missed my country. I realized that I would never see Vietnam again.

After a short period on the island of Guam, we were brought to a refugee camp in Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, near Little Rock. There were quite a few Vietnamese already there. Everybody was asking about "sponsors."

Many Americans visited the camp, just like a slave market. Many were rice farmers in Arkansas who wanted Vietnamese as cheap laborers. They would invite refugees into the coffee shop and talk with them. If these Americans thought, "Oh, this or that person is good," they went to the office to fill out sponsorship papers.

My former USAID boss wanted to sponsor my family to Washington. I said, "No, I don't want to bother a good friend. My family is too large." I was afraid that he would have to feed all sixteen of us.

¹Gerald Ford, News Conference, 6 May 1975, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Gerald R. Ford, Book I—January 1 to July 17, 1975* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), 642-43.

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To make resettlement easier, I divided the extended family into three groups: my wife and kids; my parents' group, and my in-laws' family. My sponsor was the pastor of a Methodist church in central Ohio. He owned sixteen hundred acres of land, with around a million pine trees that needed trimming. He also had chestnuts, blueberries, and grapevines.

I helped him draw a plan to improve his property. But that wasn't what he wanted—he expected me to be a simple laborer. And we had misunderstandings about religion. I am a Catholic, and my wife is a Buddhist. I told him, "In front of God we are equal. I believe in God the same as you. But I want to keep my own religion."

Every week his wife, Elizabeth, would drive us to the supermarket. My wife is a good cook, but she didn't know anything about American food, like ground beef. Thanh wanted to buy pork, but Elizabeth said, "No. You are limited to a twenty-five-dollar budget a week." And the sponsor wanted me to talk English with my children. I said, "No, they will learn bad speaking habits from me. It's better for them to learn correct American English at school."

We were lucky that the town's Catholic pastor, Father Ron, allowed us to live in his rectory. But, after two months, the sponsor wanted to send us back to Fort Chaffee. I was afraid to go back to the camp. If we returned, as many others had, it would look bad for the refugee program. So I asked the sponsor, "Sir, please wait one more month. I will look for another sponsor."

Father Ron didn't want to create a problem with the Methodists, so he took me to his native town, a short drive away. The church agreed to sponsor my family. Our first day in Lancaster, Ohio, I found a job as a donut baker. I worked twelve hours a day, six days a week. The shop owner trained me and paid \$100 a week. My kids enrolled in school, and my wife stayed home with the baby.

I was still coming out of shock from leaving our homeland. My emotions were very unstable. I was constantly dreaming of Vietnam. I had a lot of nightmares. My boss had very much sympathy for me. But I felt too much stress.

After nine months of working in the shop, one day in mid-1976, I made ten dozen donuts that didn't rise enough. One of my coworkers yelled at me. She said, "If you don't want to work, get out. We don't want you here." I said, "I'm sorry. I quit tomorrow."

I drove to Chicago, where my in-laws were living. The second day, I found a job as a janitor at Water Tower Place, the most luxurious shopping mall. My wife and children came to join me a week later.

The majority of the janitors at the mall were Vietnamese. The company liked to hire us, because we did the job well. But sometimes the superintendent of the building came to my supervisor and said, "We want these gooks out of here tomorrow." So some Vietnamese went to the Department of Labor, who ruled that the superintendent's prejudice was illegal.

Uptown was the area where many Vietnamese refugees were sent by the voluntary agencies. My wife and I found a place to live in the Albany Park neighborhood, which had a lot of Koreans and other Asians. We found that my income was not enough to meet the family's needs. So although Thanh's English was not good, she found a second-shift job at a factory making plastic cups. We rotated responsibility for the children.

My son, Tran, was nine years old, and my daughters were five, four, three, and one. My two oldest children had a lot of problems with their classmates in Chicago. The school in Albany Park was a mixture of white, black, Asian, everything. Tran was beaten sometimes, and his teacher wasn't patient with him, because he didn't know English. I went to the school and told the principal that I thought the teacher was being unfair. The principal was sympathetic and said, "I understand." After that there was no more problem.

After one year at the mall, I was appointed supervisor. My responsibility was the Continental Bank. But the next year, in 1978, I realized that there were a few thousand Vietnamese refugees in Chicago who needed assistance. When I heard that Travelers and Immigrants Aid was looking to hire a caseworker, I took the job.

I found an apartment large enough for all of my children in Uptown, on Argyle and Sheridan, right in the center of the Vietnamese refugee community. Robberies and crime throughout the neighborhood were severe. My cousin, who lived one floor below me, was robbed twice. Thieves came into his apartment, tied up his family, and robbed them.

Every day, after finishing at my office, I would go on the street and ask people about their needs. To improve the area, the first thing we had to deal with were the community associations, who wanted the refugees to leave. So we worked with the church, the police, and local officials. As a caseworker, I served as a mediator between the refugees and the authorities. Many problems occurred at the medical center and in the schools. Small issues were magnified by language and cultural differences.

For instance, in Vietnam, when both parents work, their older children take care of the babies. But in America, that creates problems. The schools would call the homes to ask why students weren't attending class. In many cases, neither the parents nor the children could speak English. Since I was the one who registered the kids in school, the authorities would call me to help.

I would visit the families at night to explain the law to them. They would respond, "But I need them to watch the little children." I'd emphasize, "If you don't obey the law, they'll take away your children." There were no day-care centers. That put extra pressure on families working in low-paying jobs who were trying to be self-supportive and stay off welfare.

The older kids attend Senn High School, which is considered the most ethnically diverse in America. Some seventy-eight languages are spoken there. There weren't many problems with the white American kids, but other ethnic groups really gave the Vietnamese children a hard time. Especially the blacks, Mexicans, and Chinese.

Chinese kids from Hong Kong chased the refugee children: "Go home. Go back where you came from." Usually the refugee children kept quiet. They listened to their parents. "Go to school to learn and study—not to fight." But the children couldn't be patient any more.

A fight began between a Vietnamese-Chinese and a Hong Kong Chinese boy. It quickly expanded to four, six, twelve kids, then became a big battle. Some of the Hong Kong kids were hospitalized. The first response was a lot of prejudice toward the refugees. In the newspaper, an authority said, "Because Vietnamese kids grew up in wartime, what they know is killing, nothing else." It became a hot issue in the community. And the parents of the Chinese kids tried to sue the refugee parents. So

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I called a lawyer. I told him, "I need your help. I don't have money to pay the fee for the children. And most of their parents are on welfare." The lawyer said, "Okay, I'll see what I can do." We had a long conversation about refugee life here and our culture. The lawyer adapted well. He used all the facts I gave him and won the case.²

1. What refugee groups did President Ford cite as examples?
2. What points does the President raise in defense of admitting the refugees?
3. What does President Ford state is the reason of resistance to admitting the Vietnamese refugees?
4. What seemed to be the role of a refugee sponsor?
5. What areas of conflict developed between Trong and his sponsor?
6. Give some examples of negative attitudes of Americans specifically to Trong, his wife and children.
7. What kinds of jobs did Trong have before he became a caseworker for the Travelers and Immigrants Aid?
8. Why do you think the Vietnamese children received the most problems from, as Trong says, "the blacks, Mexicans, and Chinese?"

²Al Santoli, "Uptown," in *New Americans: An Oral History* (New York: Viking, 1988), 112-117.