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WASHINGTON POST

The Refugee Strategy

America's 21-year war in Vietnam is ending as it began—with massive population displacements encouraged by U.S. policy, which would not have occurred without American intervention, and which are storing up human and political problems which will afflict both Vietnam and America for years to come.

The American aircraft today fly ammunition into Saigon and fly babies out: The CIA's Col. Edward G. Lansdale was doing the same thing in Hanoi exactly 20 years ago. Unwary children were hustled into airplanes as they took off, to ensure their relatives followed on the next one. Before evacuating refugees stampeded into Haiphong by U.S. rumor campaigns, ships of the American "Mercy Flotilla" cached arms in the Tonkin delta.

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The American effort to convert South Vietnam from the "temporary regrouping zone" established by the 1954 Geneva Accord into "this valiant partner of the free world," as John Foster Dulles described the Saigon regime the United States established, always has rested on the deliberate production of refugees. Ever since the late Dr. Thomas A. Dooley provided the CIA cover story for the 1954 operation "Exodus" in his best selling "Deliver Us From Evil," it has been U.S. policy to deprive the guerrilla fish their water, by driving populations into vast urban shanty towns, or into "strategic hamlets" which were barely disguised concentration camps.

"Refugees make solid citizens," one USAID manifesto explained. As the firepower war began, Gen. William Westmoreland described the social and political rationale of his search-and-destroy operations: "I expect a tremendous increase in the number of refugees." The strategy was defined in the jargon of the time by Ambassador Robert Komer, who had overall responsibility for the Phoenix program of counter-terror. "If we can attrite the population base of the Vietcong," he said, "it'll accelerate the process of degrading the V.C."

Eight million South Vietnamese and half of Laos' three million people were made refugees, often dozens of times. The Nixon-Kissinger Cambodia invasion created two million refugees in three months. Official U.S. reports that the firepower war was killing twice as many children under 13 as

fully armed U.S. combat troops; that refugee children were developing diseases, such as night blindness, previously unknown in Indochina, were welcomed by U.S. officials as signs of "progress." Depopulating the country side, not military progress, provided the U.S. statistics that the population of Vietnam was increasingly "friendly and secure."

America, according to the Harvard counter-insurgency expert, and a longtime colleague of Kissinger, Professor Samuel Huntington, had discovered "the answer to wars of national liberation." It consisted of defeating a "rural revolutionary movement" by "forced-draft urbanization." Explaining the massive refugee movements produced by his Vietnamization program, the Cambodia invasion and the bombing of Laos, President Nixon declared: "The enemy will be denied all but the most limited and furtive access to the people."

It was this "refugee policy" that created what Sen. J. W. Fulbright called "a society of prostitutes and mercenaries"—and the caricature of civilization produced in South Vietnam by the American way of war is what now accounts for the collapse of a state that never had any economic, political or social basis except that provided by the Americans.

The South Vietnamese soldiers fleeing an enemy which has not yet attacked—and trying to push their motor bikes on to U.S. ships—sum up the product of American "nation-building"—a militarist society with nothing worth fighting for; a consumer society that produces nothing. The present Communist offensive has nudged the house of cards Vietnamization built.

Official U.S. concern with the victims of a 20-year refugee policy dates from last week. President Ford's "mission of mercy" is merciful principally to Americans. It camouflages responsibility for uprooting more than 12 million people in the satisfaction of providing spare bedrooms 8,000 miles away for children who will grow up in an alien society.

It provides the ideal emotional and bureaucratic escape from America's real responsibilities. Instead of planning comprehensive aid for redevelopment, the Washington task forces grind out scenarios for airlifting millions to freedom. As thousands claw and bribe their ways on to U.S. aircraft, U.S. officials, rather than trying to understand the bases of their Vietnam failure, assert yet again that a nation is "voting with its feet" against communism.

The validity of such assertions can be judged by imagining the chaos if a U.S. President suddenly announced that one million Bengalis, Ethiopians

strip away the technical skills that were the Vietnamization program's sole potential contribution to Vietnam's future. They will also ensure automatic Communist control by removing the one group whose usefulness might have moderated a doctrinaire Marxist approach to Vietnamese reconstruction.

Americans consistently have refused to accept their efforts in Vietnam as a case of empire building. Yet the gap between the partition of India and the tragedy of Bangladesh; between the Bay of Pigs and hiring Cuban exiles to burgle Watergate; between empires taking their "loyalists" home with them, and the plight of the Indonesians in the Netherlands, and of the Uganda Asians in Britain, suggest the long range problems that mass evacuations will create.

At least so far as Americans are concerned, however, the principal disaster President Ford's evacuation will ensure may be psychological. America's 20-year war has become a striking historical example of a nation simply unwilling to admit a mistake—of the persistent refusal to search for the reasons for the greatest national misjudgment in American history.

Kissinger is no less locked into the Vietnam illusion than was John Kennedy or Dean Acheson. With his evacuation program, President Ford, like all his predecessors, has made his own Vietnam "commitment"—not to the people of South Vietnam, but to self-deception. The evacuation of Vietnamese orphans, emotionally understandable, can rightly be described as cradle-snatching. But its real significance, so far as Americans are concerned, is that it starkly reveals how many Americans still implicitly believe it is better for Vietnamese to become Americans, rather than to remain Vietnamese, as is their birthright, if it means living under a government that America does not like.

American power nevertheless has at last reached a situation in which it is impotent; nothing the United States can do now can prevent most Vietnamese at last from being left to work out their own destinies in their own country.