

Strangers and Natives

IN THE NATION

By Tom Wicker

Some of the furor over the admission of Vietnamese refugees through "the golden door" symbolized by the of the Vietnamese refugees are heads sided. That is fortunate, as the United States could hardly, in this single instance for which it bears so much responsibility, have sacrificed a long tradition of hospitality to "the homeless, tempest-tossed" of all nations.

A point of singular importance was nevertheless made by some of those who raised questions about the admission of the Vietnamese refugees. They were not opposed to admission itself, but as President Carl Holman of the National Urban Coalition put it in a letter to The New York Times:

"Something other than mere meanness of spirit is involved when Mexican-American citizens note that similar concern is not shown for their relatives and friends caught up in the crude machinery of our immigration policies; or when advocates for unadopted black and brown American children speak out at a time when public attention is being directed at the plight of Vietnamese children."

The issue is not, in other words, the Vietnamese refugees themselves. There are, after all, relatively few of them—only perhaps 120,000, some of whom will surely decide to return to Asia—an established, legal annual inflow to the United States of 290,000 immigrants, 170,000 from the Eastern Hemisphere, 120,000 from the Western Hemisphere. President Ford has

estimated, moreover, that only 35,000 into account discouraged workers as of families who are likely to seek wage-earning positions right away.

The issue, rather, is symbolic—that while American hearts and communities and a substantial part of the public treasury are opened to Vietnamese refugees, far too little is being done for white, black and brown Americans already living in poverty and despair in this country.

The National Urban League, for example, has what it calls a "hidden unemployment index," which takes into account discouraged workers as well as those actively seeking employment. According to that index, black unemployment actually ran at 21 per cent in the last quarter of 1974; white unemployment actually was 10.7 per cent—both figures nearly double the official jobless rates.

A disproportionate number of those without jobs and hope are women, minorities and young people. A survey by Charlayne Hunter in The New York Times estimates that black teen-age unemployment—officially put at about 40 per cent—may actually be as high as 60 per cent. The Congressional Black Caucus has warned President Ford that real joblessness in the inner cities may be up to 45 per cent.

The consequences can be searing for all of society. The Los Angeles Times, scarcely an alarmist journal, ran a series of articles on conditions in the Watts area that portrayed a community of "dreams deferred," in which unemployment had produced—for example—a rise in gang warfare and a marked decline in the performance of ghetto schools.

Nothing much is now being planned to combat such conditions, either by the Ford Administration or by the Democratic Congress, in both of which the overriding fear seems to be that economic recovery will bring renewed inflation. Accordingly, the Administration has outlined policies that will maintain unemployment at about 8 per cent this year, 7.8 per cent next year and 7.5 per cent in 1977. The House and Senate budget committees are pushing for spending and deficit levels that will result in pushing unemployment down to about 7.5 per cent by the end of 1976. This is nothing more nor less than "bipartisan agreement to tolerate massive unemployment," in the apt phrase of William Lucy of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, writing in The New Republic.

This kind of hesitant attack on unemployment and its concomitants—not just such physical facts as idleness and malnutrition but anger, frustration and hopelessness—may be one of the most perilous gambles in American history. A whole generation of young people may be coming of age in the cities with nowhere to turn but to drugs, crime, violence, disorder and political extremism. Surely there must be ways to guard against inflation other than at such an intolerable social price.

Beside these conditions and this threat, the physical and financial plight of 120,000 Vietnamese refugees is a relatively small matter. Compared to what the nation owes its own, what it owes the refugees is minimal. These are not reasons why the debt to the

refugees should not be honored but they should be powerful reminders that first things ought to come first.

The presence among the refugees, moreover, of numerous young men who obviously did not choose military service in defense of South Vietnam raises once again the question of American draft resisters and deserters. If we are to provide effective amnesty for the one, equity and humanity alike demand it for the other.