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The Vietnamese Are Coming—and the Town of

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—The Vietnamese are coming, but this little town doesn't want them.

Mixing rumors of epidemic with economic fear and simple xenophobia, many of its citizens are protesting the planned placement of refugees from South Vietnam in a tent city at nearby Eglin Air Force Base.

About 1,500 immigrants are expected to arrive Friday or Saturday in an airlift from Saigon, and although they are to be strictly quarantined on a sandy site about four miles from here, the very thought of their presence has raised the hackles of the local populace.

"Far's I'm concerned, they can ship them all right back," snapped one woman here today—and from one end of town to the other and in the cities around the base, many of her neighbors agreed.

A petition asking that the refugees be placed elsewhere was being circulated here this morning, Children in one local school joked about

shooting a few of the refugees. With various shadings, adults were making it clear that the Vietnamese are not welcome.

In a radio poll taken by station WFTW yesterday, 80 per cent of the people who responded said that they did not want the refugees to be brought to Eglin.

Military spokesmen from the sprawling base have assured local officials that the Vietnamese will not be allowed to leave their compound, and they have promised them that very few civilians will even be aware of the Vietnamese's presence. Apparently, their words have eased little of the tension.

"There's no telling what kind of diseases they'll be bringing with them," said Vincent Davis.

What sort of diseases?

"I don't know," he said, "but there's bound to be some of those tropical germs floating around."

Mr. Davis is manager of the American Opinion Bookstore, a franchised operation of the John Birch Society, and in the back room of the shop last night, the local members of the society got together to discuss the coming of the refugees.

#### 'Not a Welcoming Committee'

"I can't tell you what was said," Mr. Davis reported, "but it wasn't exactly the organization of a welcoming committee."

Oklaloosa County, like much of Florida's Panhandle, is a rigidly conservative and militaristic region represented in Congress by Representative Robert Sikes, a member of the House Armed Services Committee.

There were those here who felt that Mr. Sikes, by protesting the imminent arrival of the refugees, had misread his constituency. "If he had told these people that the Vietnamese should be welcomed with open arms—that they were people to whom we owned something—then you would have seen an entirely different situation," said one local politician.

#### Not Enough for Social Security'

Whether or not that is true, Mr. Sikes did not do that. In fact, he and Senator Lawton Chiles, a Democrat, vigorously objected to the Defense Department's plan to place the refugees at Eglin, and the protest immediately began and have continued.

In Grady H. Tomberlin's Barber Shop in Valparaiso, he and a customer were talk-

ing about the incoming immigrants. "We got enough of our own problems to take care of," Mr. Tomberlin, said.

"You're right," his white-haired customer said, shifting nervously beneath the striped cloth. "They don't even have enough money to take care of Social Security now—and they want to bring in more people."

Mr. Tomberlin snipped angrily away behind the man's ears. "I don't see why I ought to work and pay taxes for those folks who wouldn't work over there. They ought to have stayed on over there," he said.

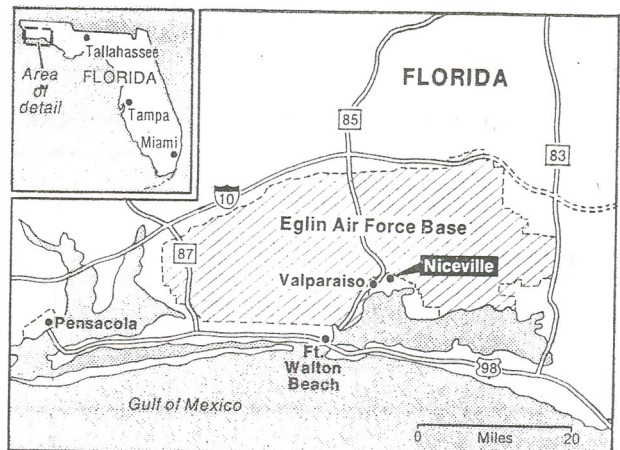
"Right," said the customer. "Who the hell's going to feed them when they get here?"

"We are," said Mr. Tomberlin. "We are."

Unemployment here in Florida's Panhandle is now between 12 and 13 per cent and the dread of new competition for jobs seemed enough to prompt an almost hysterical mood among the people.

#### 'Like Any other Small Town'

"They are afraid," said Henry L. Lewis, a captain on Niceville's 10-man police force. "They're afraid these people will steal their livelihoods."



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## Niceville, Fla., Doesn't Like It

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One of the five physicians in town, a general practitioner explains it simply in different terms. "Niceville is just like any other small town," he said. "Folks here don't like anybody they didn't know when they were kids, and they sure didn't know these refugee people when they were kids."

But there seems more to the hostility than that. Several of the 500 Vietnamese who already live in the region — mostly women who married Air Force personnel now stationed at Eglin — said today that they had never been completely accepted.

"It's definitely racial," said one woman. "You can hear it in the shops and the stores. They stare and they stare, and when you go by there's a lot of giggling."

Last winter, a young Air Force sergeant entered the office of a local fuel company, paid his bill, returned to his car and drove away with his Vietnamese-born wife.

"What gets into boys over there," the manager muttered as he watched the couple drive away, "marrying one of those—those gooks?"

The hostility extends even into the younger citizens. At Fort Walton Beach High School yesterday, many of the students were talking

about organizing a "gook klux klan." And the members of a 12th grade psychology class said they were frightened that the refugees would attempt to convert them to Communism.

### Fear of Communism

"But they're not Communists," one student argued. "They're coming here because they're running from Communists."

"It doesn't matter," came the response. "They're Vietnamese aren't they?"

A senior girl said that she had not heard a single good word about the arrival of the Vietnamese "except from my sister."

Robert E. Carr, a 40-year-old realtor in Valparaiso, said that he had the same fears as the children. "How do you know we're not getting the bad guys?" he asked. "You can't say for sure. Nobody can, and Lord knows we got enough Communist infiltration now."

Nevertheless, despite the rumors of epidemics and the economic fears and the racial epithets, the Vietnamese are coming. But in a town where the local bank once distributed John Birch Society literature with monthly statements, it does not seem that they could possibly be happy here.

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