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High Aide Says U.S. May Airlift 3,000 More Refugee Youngsters

by Richard Flaste

Controversy Is Growing

By RICHARD FLASTE

The airlift of children from South Vietnam, begun last week with a sense of urgency and compassion, has left in its wake bitter argument over whether taking children from their homeland is an appropriate or necessary way to deal with a crisis.

Those who have always opposed foreign adoption because they see it depleting nations of their children are angrier than ever. At the same time, some who might defend foreign adoption under other circumstances are saddened and perplexed by what they describe as haste and disorganization in this operation.

Some of the most impassioned opposition has come from a number of Vietnamese in this country. For instance,

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Pham Thanh, an 18-year-old high school student in Berkeley, Calif., brought to this country after he was wounded, is deeply insulted by the airlift.

"Vietnamese love their children," he said, "and will take care of them no matter who is in power next." The youth, who hopes to return after the war "to help in the rebuilding," said the airlift was "robbing" his country.

A number of theologians, too, have expressed outrage. George W. Webber, an anti-war activist who heads the New York Theological Seminary, said he was "infuriated by the airlift."

"The idea that it's to save children's lives angers me," he said. "It's the desire of families in this country who want children badly that has led to the airlift—not the likely death of the children, because that's unlikely." He, like other critics, believes that the children in orphanages are actually safer than many homeless refugees.

The questions at issue include these: Is foreign adoption the best alternative for these children? If it is most desirable, should still others be brought here? Was the airlift begun only in the children's best interest, or did it involve other, perhaps less admirable motives?

A spokesman for the Holt Adoption Program of Eugene, Ore., which as of Monday had been responsible for 400 of the nearly 2,000 children sent here and which hoped to bring over at least 40 more, said:

"We don't rush into these things. We have a staff of 100 in Saigon who've been working with these children, preparing them. In the United States we have screened prospective adoptive parents."

Cites Difficulties

When a child has a parent still living, she said, "We know the best thing is for the mother to care for the child." But the war had made that impossible in some cases, the spokesman explained, and made even traditional reliance on extended families difficult.

She said that Holt's primary concern had been the children of American G.I.'s who, because of their mixed race, were stigmatized by other Vietnamese, and perhaps faced a bleak future in South Vietnam. But she did not know how many in the airlift actually were of mixed race. She contended that "the needs of these children won't wait until tomorrow."

> *"I don't believe that because you are born in Vietnam, you have to be raised as a Vietnamese to be a human being."*

The feeling of many who see foreign adoption as the most desirable alternative for at least some children was summed up by William Taylor, executive director of Travelers Aid—International Social Service. "We feel that we have a tremendous responsibility to the children we've been working with," he said. "We know they're going to caring and loving homes." Other agency spokesmen point to what they consider the responsibility of the American people to get the children to safety.

A note of caution came from the Child Welfare League of America, which represents child-care agencies. Joseph H. Reid, its director, said he feared an "unwise," more extensive effort to "bring many thousands of Vietnamese children here" and he noted that such an effort was "already being demanded by many people."

Frank G. Offio, executive director of C.A.R.E., warned that while the outpouring of offers of homes was well motivated, it "required more thought, more preparation and more reasoned judgment."

Dr. Edward Zigler, a Yale psychologist, was angered by the airlift.

"These children are being used as pawns for a variety

of reasons," he said, "but I don't think we really care about them.

"They are being put on planes deathly sick, in a crash one day, on a plane the next. If one of them dies of illness because of our haste, we'll all be guilty. This can't be in the best interest of the children."

"And," he continued, "we've been ripping them right out of their culture, their community — I don't think we understand the value of those things. It's some kind of emotional jag we are on."

Near Tears

Dao Spencer, who was born and schooled in Vietnam before coming to the United States at 18 for higher education, is now deputy executive director of the American Council of Voluntary Agencies. She is moved to near tears when she talks about the airlift.

Although she approved of the airlift of the first 2,000 children because she believed they had been carefully screened, she maintains that "the United States has no moral right to move children en masse."

She was in Saigon earlier this year and says she heard at first hand stories of how fathers return after years away to find wife dead and child in an orphanage, given up for adoption.

Tran Tuong Nhu, a Vietnamese anthropologist living in California, said she was "livid" about the airlift.

"What is this terror Americans feel that my people will devour children?" she said. She said she believes that if the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong defeated the South, the future of the children there might be brighter. "There are 22,000 day-care centers in the North," she said. "They love children and take care of them."

The anthropologist said she could not even accept the argument that it would be better for mixed-race children to be sent here (an argument that gives many other opponents of foreign adoption pause).

"While racism does exist, it is more for political reasons than cultural ones," she said. "The child with foreign blood serves as a constant reminder of the bitter experience of foreign intervention that still exists, but this will most certainly decline when the war is ended, as it did after the French left."

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Dr. Shirley Jenkins, a professor of social research at Columbia, finds the resentment of some Vietnamese thoroughly understandable. She says that her research shows a "tremendous resentment among ethnic groups" when people try to help by adopting children in a time of difficulty.

She thinks that removing children is just the opposite of the need to join together that is felt during a crisis. Beyond that, she agrees with many other critics that the airlift has confused the desire to get the children to safety with the idea that safety means permanent resettlement in a foreign land.

A woman who worked with the wounded in Vietnam for three years before returning here in 1973 is also resentful of what has happened. Jane Barton, an Indo-China expert for the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker-affiliated group, said she thinks well-intentioned Americans do not realize that there is the strong possibility of resettling the children within Vietnam after the war.

She argued that because the extended family was so strong and children meant so much to the Vietnamese, Vietnam might prove as successful as Nigeria has in resettling homeless following the civil war over Biafra.

She was especially saddened by what she described as the ignorance about Vietnamese culture as American parents adopt their children.

But that argument, as well as the one about the hope of resettlement, is not accepted by everyone.

Sees Some 'Paternalism'

Edwin O. Reischauer, the former Ambassador to Japan who is now at Harvard, said on the issue of culture that he saw an element of racism in it.

"I don't believe that because you are born in Vietnam you have to be raised as a Vietnamese to be a human being," he said. Although he did feel there was "a bit of paternalism" in bringing the children here, he did not see it as "an outrage."

Historically, the controversy is unusual—although the airlife of children is "not entirely unprecedented," according to Dr. Howard Wriggin of the East Asian Institute at Columbia.

"During South Asian famines, parents have given children away to be better cared for by someone else," he said. "And during World War II in Lisbon there was a plan to bring 350 children from Vichy France to the United States for adoption, but it fell through.

No Cultural Gap

"But there wasn't the cultural gap we're seeing now," he added. "What I do believe is unprecedented is the movement of children from an Asian culture to a Western one so dramatically and in such large numbers at once."

Dr. Lucian Pye, a political scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, doesn't wish to argue on whether the children "would be better off here or there—you just don't know." But he thinks the American response is of historical significance, stunning in its magnitude.

"What strikes me is this amazing psychological phenomenon, this outburst," Dr. Pye said. "We're trying to prove that we are not really abandoning these people. The guilt feeling is very deep, cutting across hawk and dove alike. We want to know we're still good, we're still decent.

"Who is the orphan?" he asks. "The children, or Vietnam?"