

Toward a New Life

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America's better instincts are on trial. There is simply no way to shed the responsibility, proclaimed throughout our country's history, for providing a haven to those fleeing from persecution and conquest.

Gov. David Pryor of Arkansas set a needed tone of sympathetic welcome yesterday as the first planeload of Vietnamese refugees touched down at Fort Smith. He received the simple and eloquent reply from a Saigon doctor: "We thank you for giving us the chance to make our lives again."

Of all the waves of large-scale immigration which have reached this country's shores, this must be the least expected, most disorganized and least prepared. Misunderstandings and confusion may be inevitable under the tragic and chaotic circumstances under which nearly a hundred thousand people have left their homeland in the past few weeks to make their way to the United States. The brunt of the first inflow is being felt in a few communities across the country, not unnaturally provoking some nervousness among surprised local residents who had been given little or no advance guidance.

However—even if the number of eventual refugees reaches the 150,000 mark, as Administration coordinators now speculate—the fact is that this figure is but a fraction of the number of Cubans who were welcomed here after the Castro regime took power, and it is well below the total flow of immigrants whom the country accepts routinely in an ordinary year.

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Uncertainty about funding is the most immediate limitation to the resettlement effort. The principle is generally accepted that resettlement is a Federal obligation, not the responsibility of any local authorities; it is now up to both Administration and Congress to produce an appropriation bill to fund the immediate costs of transporting, housing and feeding the Vietnamese refugees who are under American protection.

The makeshift measure which the House of Representatives rejected Thursday hardly began to recognize this problem, and further confused the point with other issues of evacuation and humanitarian aid in Indochina, many of which have been overtaken by events.

It is easy to be cynical about the agility with which some of Saigon's political and economic elite may have been able to get themselves and their wealth out of their country; but to focus on a handful of such individuals is to distort the wider reality: the bulk of the immigrants have arrived here penniless, fleeing for their lives in search of freedom. Hard-pressed immigration authorities are nowhere near providing a breakdown of occupations; it is nevertheless evident that among the refugees are many thousands of persons capable of making a genuine contribution to American society, once they find themselves.

As the Bicentennial approaches, the people of this country have an unexpected occasion to reaffirm the principles on which American society was founded. The United States can be proud to give people in need the chance to make their lives again.