



# American Hostility Toward the Refugees

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A PUZZLE tinges the overwhelmingly hostile reaction of ordinary Americans to the Vietnamese refugees. The puzzle is why do many intelligent and well-educated Americans find the reaction puzzling. For the whole history of the war testifies that most Americans don't care beans about Vietnam.

Not because of what are called "racist" reasons. On the contrary, the true background lies in the strong, autonomous inner beat of American life.

The attention of 200 million throbbing operators is not readily gained by remote people in faraway places. Europe matters to the United States because so many Americans have roots there. Russia and China count because of sheer size and the impact of titanic revolutions. So do the Japanese because of a sneaking suspicion they know how to build better mouse-traps.

But Vietnam?

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A MERICAN indifference to Vietnam shaped the two central features of the war — its massive and enduring character. In the early 1960s a group which I have called the "piano-wire hawks" argued that the Vietnam war could only be won by following the lead of the insurgents. They felt the United States had to adopt guerrilla tactics — knife in the teeth and piano wire in the hand.

But the American Army and the American people were not about to change themselves into Vietnamese. So this country fought the war with planes and tanks and big battalions.

Connected reasons explain why the fighting went on so long. As early as the 1966 election, I believe, the majority of Americans were fed up with pouring out blood and taxes in Vietnam. And then there was the anti-war movement — or at least that element of it which used Vietnam as a stick to beat the United States. Ordinary people may have had it with the war. But they didn't think the United States was a rotten country.

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SO PRESIDENT NIXON was able to rally what he called the "silent majority." And the war went on and on and on, even though hardly anybody wanted it. The country, long sick of Vietnam, got sicker and sicker as events ground to their inevitable end.

So now more than ever the country wants to wash its hands of Vietnam. Hence the hostility to the refugees. It may not be a generous attitude. But it is not puzzling. It is natural and logical. Even healthy.

For the basic fact is that the Vietnam experience is not powerfully relevant to the present problems of the United States.