

A Real American

OBSERVER

By Russell Baker

The sour-spirited reception given the Vietnam refugees is not surprising. It is perfectly consistent with the ancient American debate about who is fit to be American.

When the English got to America, they found many people who were not fit to be Americans. There were the Indians, and the English put them in their place, which was underground or out in the low-rent district away from the seashore.

There were the French, who were fitter than most people to be Americans because they were at least Europeans, but they didn't speak English and so had to be driven out.

The Dutch came closer to fitting the qualifications for real Americans, but they didn't speak English either, so were sent to Albany, on the theory that they would freeze or wither away.

The Spanish were absolutely hopeless. They came from the Mediterranean. They had dark skin. They took siestas in the shank of the day when real Americans were working to pay their taxes. They were shunted

off southward into jungle and desert.

Established as the real Americans, the English confronted the Africans, whom they had imported in chains. An obvious case. They were absolutely essential to do the heavy work involved in building the country, but could never be real Americans because as everybody knew, real Americans were hard-working people and blacks were shiftless and lazy and spent all their time singing, dancing and cadging handouts from the Government.

So the real Americans wrote it firmly into the Constitution that the blacks were not real Americans.

Germans, Swedes and other Northern Europeans—but not Irishmen—were granted real Americanhood with little delay, since, like the real Americans who had put so many Indians underground and constitutionally excluded blacks from real Americanhood,

they were light-skinned and Protestant.

Then—Problems, problems. The Irish. They were white enough, all right, and even, remotely, European. But they were all so Catholic. The solution was to grant them 18th-rate Americanhood, put them on four generations of probation at hard labor, and let them be pronounced real Americans if they survived.

The Indians persisted despite their high interment rate, and were not so easily dealt with. You couldn't trust an Indian, so the real Americans cheated, betrayed and double-crossed them, rounded them up, put a fence around them and pronounced them use-

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ful only for being euchred by real Americans.

The blacks, who were no whiter than the Indians, tried to qualify for real Americanhood by becoming Protestants, but all they won was the right to play musical instruments in brothels and to satisfy the real Americans' occasional thirst for swift justice by being hanged on the courthouse-square sycamore.

Soon Italians, Greeks, Poles, Slovaks, Russians and Chinese were pouring into the country. The Chinese, not being European, were declared 33d-rate Americans, and laws were passed to keep their relatives out of the country.

Italians, Greeks, Poles, Slovaks and Russians were allowed to work their way tediously to real Americanhood, except for the Jews among them, who were forbidden to join the country club.

Then came Puerto Ricans and Mexi-

cans Real Americans? Not half likely, replied the English, Germans, Swedes, Irish, Italians, Greeks, Poles, Slovaks, Russians and all the other Europeans who had now become the real real Americans.

Real Americans came from Europe, not Latin America, unless they were Cubans and hated Communism. So the Puerto Ricans and Mexicans were sent to pick beans or live in the Bronx and wait on tables.

By this time the Europeans who had arrived only forty or fifty years earlier had become such real Americans that they urged that the blacks, who had arrived 200 years before them, be exported to Africa due to inability to be real Americans.

The Indians, meanwhile, were insolently refusing to die, although they could never be real Americans, and while all this was going on, more than 100,000 refugees arrived from Vietnam. Not Europeans, but Orientals. People who could never be real Americans.

The real Americans were sour and angry. As always.