

In Defense of the Public

When the public and Congress turned thumbs down on more millions to prolong the war in Vietnam, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, in a scornful and disapproving tone of voice, rhetorically asked, "What kind of people are we?"

When the public and Congress did not instantly and enthusiastically respond to Mr. Ford's demand for hundreds of millions of dollars to resettle 150,000 Vietnamese refugees in the United States, an indignant President was reported to be "damn mad" and "shocked" and "upset."

In a recent press conference, Mr. Ford made it clear that he was "disappointed" with the American people. Actually, the administration has been indicting the U.S. public for weeks now for the administration's own failures in Vietnam. In the process it accused the American people and their congressional representatives of "losing" the war and losing, too, the confidence of our allies by refusing former President Thieu \$722 million.

As historian Arthur Schlesinger pointedly says, "When has any government ever conducted such a strange campaign against its own country?" Especially when the public's refusal to go another mile with Thieu was solidly justified, and its legitimate concern over the sudden and serious problems posed by the refugees is at least understandable.

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ministration did not help its cause by scornfully dismissing the public's first troubled reaction.

There is a general impression that the public's resistance springs from fears over aggravating unemployment and recession in the United States. Doubtless that is a factor, but there is a lot more to it than that.

It is clear, for instance, that Americans (with good reason) do not perceive the Vietnamese evacuation as comparable to the mass migrations from Hungary and Cuba in recent years. The United States took in 50,000 "freedom fighters" from Hungary after the 1956 revolt against Russia. Anti-communism was then at its height in America, and the freedom fighters, who fought Soviet tanks with rocks, were regarded as heroes. Even so, they arrived in the United States gradually; special legislation for their entry was not passed until 1958, two years after the revolt.

The 650,000 refugees from Cuba also came in gradually over a period of 15 years, most of them after the 1961

abortive Bay of Pigs invasion. Most Americans then looked upon the anti-Castro Cubans as brave and dedicated patriots.

Times have changed. Instead of the cold war we have détente. Americans loathe the whole Vietnam experience. Rightly or wrongly, they perceive many, if not most, of the adult refugees as betrayers of their own country: the public officials, the officer corps, the secret police, the plutocracy, the grafters, the heroin peddlers, the criminals, the torturers and assassins, the prostitutes, the bar girls, the bribers and the privileged in general.

What is the public to believe when day after day the front pages and television report that Thieu's troops turned to looting and shooting their own people instead of fighting the enemy and finally abandoned \$3 billion in U.S. equipment to North Vietnam? What are Americans to think when they read about refugees who "shove women and children off planes"? Mr. Ford says the Vietnamese fled because they knew they faced a blood

bath if they didn't, but dispatches from the war zone have told us that the conquerers are restoring law and order, granting amnesty even to the highest officials of the defeated government, putting people back to work, allowing the foreign press to roam around at will, reopening hospitals and schools and closing the brothels.

Do the refugees really want to be here, or are many of them merely in a momentary state of panic? The public reads of 21 out of 29 Cambodian children who were tricked into coming to Washington, D.C., under false pretenses. It hears about 45 South Vietnamese air force mechanics petitioning President Ford to let them return home. It sees the story about the evacuated Vietnamese mother in California telling Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, former vice president and premier of South Vietnam, "I want to go back and look for my son." Marshal Ky himself says, "There will be a big problem, not only for the refugees but for the United States. You have your own problems. I don't want the refugees to become a big task for your government and your country." And the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the civil rights leader, adds, "We are not doing the Vietnamese a favor by bringing them into a hostile environment that's in a depression."

Nevertheless, the refugees are either already here, or on the way, and no other country wants them. It would be rank hypocrisy to pretend that Americans welcome the burden, but since it is inescapable the best thing to do is to bear it as cheerfully as possible and make the most of it.