

“The Virgin Mary is Going South”: Refugee Resettlement in South Vietnam, 1954–1956

In the months following the 1954 partition of Vietnam, nearly one million people fled their homes north of the seventeenth parallel, hoping for better and more secure lives in the south. Many of those fleeing had served in the French colonial administration and were Catholics, and they feared political or religious persecution under Ho Chi Minh's government. South Vietnamese and American officials actively encouraged and supported the migration, despite the fact that the influx of northerners presented immediate challenges both to the southern government and to the partnership between Washington and Saigon. As they began streaming into the newly created state of South Vietnam, these refugees posed logistical problems, placed strain on South Vietnam's already-weak economy, and tested the nascent government's ability to provide basic services to those in need of public assistance. The northerners' arrival also complicated American efforts to bolster the Government of Vietnam (GVN) and to implement a bold nation-building agenda in South Vietnam. The United States had been aiding anticommunist elements in Vietnam since the beginning of the decade and, after the 1954 military defeat of the French, played an active role in creating and defending a separate, noncommunist state in southern Vietnam.

Vietnamese and American policymakers believed the “refugee crisis,” which they were at least partially responsible for manufacturing, was occurring at a crucial time for the fledgling state of South Vietnam. As a result, they became heavily invested in securing a positive outcome. These men understood that without a successful resolution to the crisis, the entire nation-building experiment in South Vietnam might fail. Perhaps as importantly, they saw the situation as a chance to prove South Vietnamese Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem's credentials as a leader and to confirm the wisdom of supporting his regime. For these reasons, refugee resettlement efforts became one of the most important and defining features of early U.S. aid to South Vietnam. American and Vietnamese officials seized the opportunity to solidify their partnership and to demonstrate the effectiveness of the GVN by instituting an ambitious policy of refugee resettlement. The ultimate goal of this policy was to make the northern émigrés self-sufficient and fully integrated into the society of southern Vietnam.

Diem and other South Vietnamese officials as well as their American patrons claimed that refugee resettlement was effective, and they celebrated the endeavor

as a resounding achievement. U.S. policymakers praised the South Vietnamese government for its accomplishments and argued that Diem's successful handling of this crisis and others proved that he deserved continued American assistance. In fact, as the refugee crisis wound down, many Americans expressed a renewed sense of confidence in Diem, the "Tough Miracle Man of Vietnam" as a 1957 article in *Life* Magazine referred to him, and in the role that future U.S. aid projects could play in supporting his government.¹

Historians have largely echoed this positive assessment of the refugee episode. Most scholars have treated the "refugee crisis," as it is often called, as a footnote to the larger story of Diem consolidating his hold on power during the first few years of South Vietnam's existence.² Even those scholars who have been most critical of U.S. involvement in Vietnam seem to have accepted the official narrative of success, rather than fully explore how the refugee episode affected either the complex political realities within South Vietnam or the United States–GVN relationship.³ For example, Louis Wiesner, whose book *Victims and Survivors* provides a quantitative and comparative approach to the refugee crisis and one of the most thorough discussions of the period, describes both the southern migration of the refugees and their resettlement as a "tremendous success."⁴ At the same time, most American scholarship considers only the high-level contributions of the U.S. government and military and tends to overlook how resettlement programs

1. John Osborne, "The Tough Miracle Man of Vietnam," *Life*, May 13, 1957, 156–76.

2. For example, in her two-paragraph account of the entire refugee episode, Marilyn Young writes of the northern migrants, "in effect they were an imported political resource for Diem, a substantial and dependent bloc of loyal supporters." Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York, 1991), 45. Similarly, George Kahin argues that Diem saw the refugees as "the most reliable and effective element in the power base he was establishing." George Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York, 1986), 84. And George Herring describes the refugee crisis as "a means of tipping the political balance toward the south and perhaps even winning the 1956 elections" in his *America's Longest War* (New York, 1979), 46.

3. A number of recent books have begun to focus on how "alliance politics" shaped or were influenced by the refugee episode. For example, John Ernst's *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing, 1998); and Philip Catton's *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, 2002) consider the refugee crisis within the context of the United States–South Vietnamese partnership. Kathryn Statler's *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington, 2007) presents the refugee crisis as a pivotal moment in the post-Second World War alliance between France and the United States. Although these studies demonstrate the significance of the refugee crisis for understanding the partnerships between the United States and its Cold War allies, they do not fundamentally challenge the conventional wisdom that resettlement was a success or examine in depth how events unfolded on the ground in South Vietnam during this period.

4. Louis Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors: Displaced Persons and Other War Victims in Vietnam, 1954–1975* (New York, 1988), 16. Wiesner's book provides one of the most detailed examinations of how the refugee evacuations actually worked and of how resettlement programs functioned in South Vietnam. Wiesner hints at some of the negative, long-term consequences of the episode, explaining, "the transfer of so many strongly anti-Communist Catholics and others who were embittered by their treatment at the hands of the Viet Minh was a significant factor in the political polarization of the two parts of Vietnam and the unwillingness of the leaders on both sides to reach a compromise settlement of their conflict," Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 16–17. However, he does not fully explore how and why these long-term problems emerged.

unfolded on the ground. Such studies largely ignore Vietnamese aspects of the story as well as the role of American nongovernmental organizations in administering resettlement programs.⁵ As a result, few studies have examined in detail the implementation of refugee programs or the importance of the refugee episode in shaping the South Vietnamese political landscape of the 1950s and early 1960s.

This study departs from previous scholarship by examining how refugee policies were implemented on the ground and the role of American civilian aid workers in that process. Unlike studies of high politics at the state level, an examination of how policies functioned at the everyday, operational level can reveal otherwise overlooked complexities in the outcome of resettlement efforts. By considering sources often overlooked by scholars, including the records of the U.S. in-country aid team, several American nongovernmental organizations, and the GVN, this study reconsiders the conventional narrative about the overall success of refugee resettlement. It also offers new insight into the critical importance of this episode for the future of U.S. involvement in Vietnam as well as American nation-building projects in other parts of the world.

A more comprehensive examination of the implementation of refugee programs reveals that resettlement efforts were not the overwhelming success that policymakers at the time and many scholars since then have made them out to be. Although nearly one million people were absorbed into South Vietnam without causing major social or economic disruptions, there is little evidence that these people were integrated into their communities or that they enhanced Diem's legitimacy and popularity. In fact, much of the evidence suggests that resettlement efforts instead polarized Vietnamese society and cost Diem political support, due to the northerners' failure to assimilate into local communities and the favors they received from the Diem regime. In some extreme cases, resettled northerners became the targets of antigovernment violence and attacks. Although the program achieved the immediate goal of relocating a large number of northerners, it fell short of satisfying many of the other critical objectives laid out by GVN and U.S. officials, such as enlarging Diem's political base and increasing the chances of South Vietnam's ability to survive without substantial outside assistance.

5. Peter Hansen's recent work represents an important exception to the trend of ignoring Vietnamese actors, as it examines the various reasons that northerners, especially Catholics, chose to move south and also why they remained in isolated enclaves after their arrival. Hansen challenges the commonly held assumptions that the refugees' departure from the north was primarily a response to American encouragement or propaganda and that their resettlement in the south was "the consequence of a deliberate and strategic policy instigated by Ngo Dinh Diem." Instead, Hansen argues that Catholic northerners emigrated for a host of reasons, all of which depended on their own initiative and choice rather than the efforts of the Americans or South Vietnamese. Hansen also describes the *ad hoc* nature of resettlement efforts and argues, "the refugees themselves were complicit in many of the key decisions made during the early stages of resettlement—decisions that inhibited the integration of the new arrivals into the mainstream of South Vietnamese society." Peter Hansen, "Bắc Đì Cù: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954–1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 176–200.

American officials and aid workers overlooked the deficiencies of refugee resettlement because of overconfidence in their methods as well as a profound desire to see their nation-building experiment succeed. As a result, they chose to allow the short-term accomplishments of resettlement programs to mask the long-term flaws in their policy of maintaining a divided Vietnam and supporting an unpopular and authoritarian leader in the south. The refugee resettlement period therefore represented a missed opportunity for Americans to notice some of the warning signs about the stability of their new partners in Southeast Asia and the limits of their influence on Vietnamese society and politics. Ultimately, the significant shortcomings of resettlement efforts—and the tendency of American policymakers to ignore them—foreshadowed many of the conflicts that would haunt the U.S.–South Vietnamese partnership in later years and contributed to tensions within South Vietnam that would eventually lead to full-scale civil war.

THE HIGH STAKES OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS

In many ways, the refugee episode was a manufactured crisis. American and South Vietnamese officials created a problem for the GVN to solve and, in doing so, a chance to demonstrate its abilities. Despite the challenges posed by the influx of refugees, Vietnamese and American officials believed that the situation presented Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic leader in a predominately Buddhist country, with an opportunity for political gain. Not only would the northern transplants increase South Vietnam's Catholic population to nearly 10 percent, they might also dramatically enhance Diem's anticommunist constituency.⁶ Furthermore, the effective management of the refugee situation would lend legitimacy to the GVN, which was simultaneously involved in efforts to suppress rival political factions. Reflecting the high stakes that American policymakers placed on ensuring a favorable outcome to the refugee crisis, the U.S. government provided the GVN with a large amount of financial, material, and technical assistance for resettlement efforts. Between 1954 and 1956, the United States dedicated \$93 million to refugee resettlement, an amount that represented about \$4.40 for every person in the country and just over 50 percent of the total nonmilitary aid package to South Vietnam in those years.⁷

6. Kahin, *Intervention*, 76. Kahin estimates that the addition of the refugees brought the Catholic minority to 9 percent in the mid-1950s. Stanley Karnow describes the "political importance" of the refugees, explaining how their arrival instantly increased the number of staunch anticommunists in South Vietnam. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983), 222.

7. During the 1955 fiscal year, the U.S. government provided \$55.8 million to South Vietnam for refugee aid. The following year, the amount of aid for refugees dropped to \$37 million. This decrease reflected a general cutback of U.S. aid to Vietnam in fiscal year 1956 as well as the perception among American officials that by 1956 Diem's regime no longer required the same degree of financial support. Leland Barrows, "Statement before Vietnam's Committee on Foreign Aid," June 14, 1956, box 649, folder 19, Michigan State University Group, Vietnam Project Papers, East Lansing, Michigan; hereafter cited as MSUG-VPP.

THE "CRISIS" AND SOUTHERN MIGRATION

The immediate impetus for the migration was the termination of the First Indochina War and the partition of Vietnam, and the influx of northerners was a direct result of U.S. and GVN policies. The ceasefire agreement between Vietnamese nationalists and the French provided for a temporary regrouping period when, for 300 days, combatants and civilians could cross the "provisional military demarcation line" at the seventeenth parallel.⁸ According to the July 1954 Geneva Accords, this division would allow combatants to return to their homes and provide time to prepare for free and open national elections. The Viet Minh signatories of the ceasefire agreement never intended a permanent separation of the country. However, the partition remained and nationwide elections never happened, in large part due to the GVN and U.S. policy of neglecting the temporary nature of partition and preventing the scheduled elections from occurring.⁹

In fact, the American and South Vietnamese decision to refer to those who moved south as "refugees" can be seen as an attempt to render a permanent political boundary at the seventeenth parallel and to define the two Vietnams as separate states in perpetuity. This terminology also suggests that the northerners who moved south were compelled to do so because of their political, economic, or religious affiliations. In keeping with Vietnamese history and the spirit of the Geneva Accords, the United Nations did not consider the northern émigrés to be refugees because they were not technically leaving their country or society of origin.¹⁰ In this article, I refer to the northerners as "migrants," "transplants," "émigrés," and "refugees" interchangeably. Although I am aware of the political implications of using the term "refugees," in the interest of avoiding some repetition and also in keeping with the language used in the American documents, I have not avoided the term "refugee." The terminology used in South Vietnamese sources varies from "người di cư," which translates simply as migrants or people who have moved, to "người tị nạn," which implies people who have moved under duress or have fled some calamity. This second term, "tị nạn," parallels more closely the American description of those northerners who moved south in the mid-1950s as refugees.

In the immediate wake of the Geneva settlement, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese migrated from one side of the partition line to the other.

8. Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam, July 20, 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954*, volume XVI (Washington, DC, 1954), 1540-2.

9. Kahin provides one of the best discussions of the Geneva settlement. Kahin, *Intervention*, 50-71, 88-91. See also *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision-making on Vietnam*, vol. 1. (Boston, 1971), hereafter cited as *The Pentagon Papers*; and Statler, *Replacing France*, 85-99.

10. As Wiesner explains, the displaced Vietnamese did not receive assistance from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees because they did not fall under the international definition of a refugee, which was someone who had left his or her country of origin. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, xvii.

Although the GVN attempted to discourage emigration, around 130,000 to 140,000 Viet Minh cadre and their families moved north of the seventeenth parallel during the regroupment period.¹¹ Far greater numbers of former combatants and civilians fled south beginning in the late summer of 1954. During the following year, between 800,000 and 900,000 civilians migrated from north to south.¹²

The United States and GVN actively encouraged this southward migration through propaganda efforts and, more importantly, by providing physical assistance in transporting those people who wanted to leave their homes in the north. As early as August 1954, a mere month after the conclusion of the Geneva Conference, high-level figures in Eisenhower's administration committed to a policy of supporting mass migration into South Vietnam. In a document dated August 20, 1954, the National Security Council agreed to "aid emigration from North Vietnam and resettlement of peoples unwilling to remain under Communist rule."¹³ To a large degree, then, the influx of northerners was an artificial emergency, which the Saigon and Washington governments actively worked to create.

Many of the transplants were Catholics from the Red River delta region, and their arrival in South Vietnam offered a potential boon to Diem's power base, which was composed primarily of staunchly anticommunist Catholics. According to U.S. Defense Department estimates conducted at the time, approximately 600,000 of the refugees were Catholics who had comprised 65 percent of North Vietnam's Catholic population.¹⁴ The arrival of these émigrés instantly doubled South Vietnam's Catholic population.¹⁵ In many cases, entire parishes followed their priests south. Kahin explains, "whether or not they feared Viet Minh reprisals, most of these priests presumably felt they would have greater scope to practice their religion in a noncommunist South under a government headed by a Catholic."¹⁶ In addition to the Catholics, some members of political opposition groups fled south, presumably fearing their chances for survival under a government dominated by the Viet Minh and led by Ho Chi Minh.

Before the partition, Catholics had comprised a disproportionately high percentage of the commercial, professional, and intellectual elite of Vietnam's

11. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 3. Kahin's estimate provides a slightly higher upper figure. He claims that between 130,000 and 150,000 people moved north. Kahin, *Intervention*, 75.

12. Kahin cites U.S. government documents, which concluded that approximately 800,000 civilians moved south under the provisions of the Geneva Agreements. Kahin, *Intervention*, 76. In 1955, the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam, which consisted of representatives from Poland, India, and Canada and was charged with enforcing the terms of the Geneva Settlement, estimated that approximately 893,000 northerners moved to South Vietnam between 1954 and 1955. *The Pentagon Papers*, 290.

13. Quoted in Kahin, *Intervention*, 74.

14. *The Pentagon Papers*, 291.

15. Kahin estimates that the refugees brought South Vietnam's Catholic population up to around 1 million. Kahin, *Intervention*, 76.

16. *Ibid.*

northern provinces.¹⁷ With their shared religion and access to Western education, Catholics enjoyed a “privileged position” under the French and were well represented among the ranks of the civil service. According to Kahin, approximately 200,000, or 25 percent, of the refugees had previously been employed as civil servants.¹⁸ After the French defeat, Catholics who had served in the colonial administration found themselves in an uncomfortable position. Despite Ho Chi Minh’s numerous appeals for national unity and his government’s guarantee of private property rights for loyal Vietnamese citizens, many Catholics feared religious persecution, and others worried about the political ramifications of their associations with the French or Bao Dai, the Emperor of Vietnam who collaborated with the French during the First Indochina War.¹⁹

As a result of the émigrés’ political loyalties and social status, the refugee movement potentially had an important effect on the governments of both North and South Vietnam. For the government of North Vietnam, the refugees’ departure meant a significant drain of professionals and bureaucrats. As Duiker explains, “although the exodus served to spare the new regime a potential source of opposition, it also deprived the northern provinces of a substantial proportion of their most affluent, creative, and industrious people.”²⁰

On the other hand, many officials within the southern government hoped that the northern émigrés represented a new pool of political support and experienced administrators. American observers anticipated a similar dynamic. Years later, they continued to project onto the situation their expectations that the northerners would bolster Diem’s political standing, despite significant evidence to the contrary. For example, in an internal examination of the early years of American involvement in Vietnam conducted in the late 1960s, U.S. analysts at the Department of Defense (DOD) concluded that the refugees had played an important role in South Vietnamese politics. According to the DOD analysis, the refugees constituted a “politically malleable, culturally distinct group, wholly distrustful of Ho Chi Minh and the DRV, dependent for subsistence on Diem’s government, and attracted to Diem as a co-religionist.”²¹ Similarly, journalist Stanley Karnow described the “political importance” of the northerners, who instantly and significantly enhanced Diem’s anticommunist constituency.²²

17. William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York, 2000), 465.

18. Kahin, *Intervention*, 76–7.

19. Even before the Geneva settlement, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) issued an eight-point program to reassure professionals, bureaucrats, and others that the new government would not seize private property unless a particular business was owned by “imperialists” or supporters of Bao Dai’s “puppet authority.” In September 1954, shortly after assuming power, Ho declared that former civil servants would not be arrested unless they took up arms against the government and that those who had previously worked for the French regime could stay in North Vietnam if they pledged allegiance to the new government. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 465.

20. Duiker, *Ibid.*, 465.

21. *The Pentagon Papers*, 248.

22. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 222.

These assessments conform to historian Carl Bon Tempo's argument about the strong connection between refugee assistance and anticommunism in the minds of American policymakers during the Cold War. As Bon Tempo explains, "American leaders believed that refugees—especially those persons fleeing communism, the Soviets, or their allies—were living symbols of Soviet brutality and communism's failure."²³ By assigning high political value to the northerners, South Vietnamese and American officials created a visible minority group, which they expected would advance their staunch opposition to communism. Perhaps because of their faith in such assumptions, most South Vietnamese and American policymakers turned a blind eye to evidence that the northerners' arrival actually contributed to political tensions and hurt Diem's popularity in the south.

Despite their desire to absorb nearly one million anticommunists and Catholics, South Vietnamese leaders understood that they lacked the resources necessary for such a major undertaking. At the Geneva Conference, the French had vowed to transport anyone who wanted to rejoin territory controlled by the French Union. However, the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, Donald Heath, concluded that the French were incapable of delivering on their promise.²⁴ South Vietnamese officials concurred, and they turned to the U.S. government for assistance. On August 5, 1954, the South Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a note to the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, requesting American assistance in transporting an estimated one million people south of the seventeenth parallel. Four days later, the American Embassy responded. The United States agreed to "extend all reasonable assistance to evacuate all Northern Vietnamese who wished to leave," in an operation that the Americans dubbed "The Campaign for Freedom."²⁵

In the following months, the U.S. government played a vital role in encouraging the refugee movement by providing enormous amounts of direct assistance to the GVN and by helping transport the northerners. American policymakers borrowed models and tactics from recent experiences dealing with refugee populations, including their involvement in assisting Europeans displaced during the Second World War.²⁶

23. Carl Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, 2008), 4.

24. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 5.

25. U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Coordinators Report of Operations, "Campaign for Freedom," August 8, 1954 to September 30, 1954, National Archives and Records Administration, Archives II, College Park, MD, record group 469, entry 1453, box 1 (hereafter cited as NARA).

26. See especially Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*. In fact, some of the Americans most intimately involved with refugees in Europe during the late 1940s transferred their skills and experiences directly to the situation in Vietnam. For example, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) sent Joseph Buttinger, its vice-chairman who had been very active in postwar Europe, to Vietnam to direct IRC operations there. Although Bon Tempo's book focuses on refugees entering the United States, his discussion of the "ideological continuity" and "procedural

Initially, official U.S. agencies took the lead in assisting those Vietnamese who wished to move south. The MAAG shared responsibilities with the newly created Special Technical and Economic Mission (STEM) and the United States Information Services (USIS). The MAAG helped in transporting refugees on American and French aircraft and ships, and also provided security at reception points in North and South Vietnam. The STEM prepared plans for receiving the refugees and for “dispersing refugees from the reception centers and settling them under conditions of security and gainful employment.” The USIS attempted to help evacuees adjust to their new lives through orientation programs.²⁷

The USIS and other American intelligence agencies also waged a propaganda campaign to encourage northerners to leave their homes by publishing and distributing leaflets, producing films about the resettlement program, and broadcasting recordings over the Voice of America. Edward Lansdale, an intelligence agent at the Saigon Military Mission and one of Diem’s closest American advisors, claimed credit for some of the more memorable efforts to promote the mass migration through propaganda and psychological warfare, or “psywar” tactics. The most famous American slogan, “the Virgin Mary is going south,” was supposedly created by Lansdale himself.²⁸ In his memoir, Lansdale described how he “passed along some psywar ideas” to a group of “Vietnamese nationalists” before they left North Vietnam.²⁹ Lansdale’s unconventional and sometimes sinister tactics included preparing a phony manifesto that called for a mass work stoppage and producing a counterfeit almanac that predicted a dark future for the communists.³⁰ According to some observers at the time, many northerners left their homes because they feared a possible U.S. atomic strike on Hanoi.³¹ Recent scholarship has fundamentally challenged the conventional wisdom that northern émigrés, especially Catholics, were motivated by (or even aware of) American propaganda efforts.³² Lansdale himself later acknowledged the limited effectiveness of U.S. and South Vietnamese propaganda.³³

consistency” that characterized American-sponsored refugee programs provides valuable insights, even for a study of US involvement with refugee populations overseas. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, 7.

27. U.S. MAAG, “Campaign for Freedom”; NARA, record group 469, entry 1453, box 1.

28. Kahin, *Intervention*, 76–7. Kahin also discusses the “black propaganda” campaign advanced by pro-Diem agents. In the months following the partition, pamphlets and leaflets warning of a possible atomic attack on North Vietnam by the United States were dropped over the northern provinces. For more on the U.S. role in encouraging the refugees to move, see Karnow, *Vietnam*, 222.

29. Edward Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American’s Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York, 1972), 224.

30. *Ibid.*, 226.

31. Kahin quotes a statement made by the deputy secretary general of the International Control Commission, the body charged with overseeing the implementation of the Geneva Accords, which suggests many northerners were motivated by such fears, Kahin, *Intervention*, 77.

32. Hansen, “Bắc Đì Cù,” 182–5.

33. Karnow, *Vietnam*, 238.

Despite their sometimes heavy-handed behavior, American officials shrewdly recognized that their involvement in recruiting new evacuees could be counter-productive and might limit popular support for the Diem regime. Therefore, the U.S. intelligence and information agencies sought to downplay their role by removing all American labels from supplies in the refugee camps and attributing any success in the program to the GVN.³⁴

Whatever the direct impact of American recruiting and propaganda efforts, the infusion of foreign assistance for those northerners, who did seek to leave, clearly facilitated their migration. Refugees began streaming out of North Vietnam within weeks of the introduction of U.S. aid. Between August 16 and September 30, 1954, the U.S. Navy transported 106,342 northerners, the vast majority of whom were civilians traveling with their families, villages, or parishes.³⁵ The British, and especially the French, also actively participated in efforts to help Vietnamese leave the north. According to Louis Wiesner, by May 1955, "allied" ships and planes had carried 768,672 northerners to South Vietnam, and more than 109,000 additional persons had traveled south by their own means.³⁶

Whereas the American officials actively promoted migration and physically assisted refugees in leaving northern Vietnam (figure 1), the Hanoi government launched its own campaign to discourage people from moving south. Rumors circulated that Viet Minh cadres committed widespread atrocities against those who attempted to leave the country. One young naval medical officer, Lt. Tom Dooley, attracted great attention with his popular book, *Deliver Us from Evil*, which detailed acts of violence supposedly perpetrated against northern refugees.³⁷ Although it is difficult to determine the accuracy of Dooley's report or the extent of reprisals directed at would-be émigrés, Dooley's book and other propaganda did serve an important function, especially in the United States. They helped to galvanize U.S. policymakers and the American public in support of U.S. intervention in the refugee episode. American readers and politicians celebrated Dooley as a model of humanitarian values, and his staunchly anti-communist account of the refugee crisis lent a moral imperative to U.S. assistance of Diem's regime.

For its part, the North Vietnamese government claimed to adhere to the Geneva Accords by providing transportation to embarkation points for individuals

34. U.S. MAAG, "Campaign for Freedom," NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 1.

35. Of those refugees, 6,003 were military personnel and the rest were civilians. U.S. MAAG, "Campaign for Freedom," NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 1.

36. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 6. The "allied carries" included French ships and planes, U.S. ships, and British ships, and Wiesner provides a breakdown of how many people each country's carriers transported.

37. A young naval medic, Lieutenant Dooley, was sent to the northern port city of Haiphong in 1954 to build health clinics and provide medical attention to northerners being evacuated on American vessels. In his book, Dooley describes attending to people who had been tortured by the Viet Minh or DRV authorities because of their desire to flee the country. Tom Dooley, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Story of Vietnam's Flight to Freedom* (New York, 1956).



Figure 1: Refugees aboard the USS Bayfield observe an American sailor rationing out water as they journey from Haiphong to Saigon, 1954. Photo courtesy of the National Archives, Naval Historical Foundation Photographic Services, Washington, D.C.

and families that wished to go south. However, according to American reports, the local Viet Minh forces responsible for providing that transportation insisted on segregating men, women, and children. As a result, families feared being separated and not reunited, and many northerners who might otherwise elect to leave the country dared not take the risk. Photographs of boats filled with bullet holes, which had ostensibly been attacked by hostile forces, circulated in rural areas of the northern provinces and may have further deterred prospective emigrants.³⁸ Perhaps in response to these fears, Americans aiding the refugees were instructed to pay particular attention to keeping families together and safe as they transported them south. According to a MAAG report, “extreme care was taken to maintain family groupings,” and, during the first six weeks of the refugee crisis, only one family was separated during the move but was later reunited.³⁹

38. Lavergne to Everett, Adler and Lauve, “Viet Minh Tactics to Discourage Refugees from Moving South,” November 30, 1954, NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 1.

39. U.S. MAAG, “Campaign for Freedom,” NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 1.

RESETTLING THE REFUGEES IN SOUTH VIETNAM

For several years after the beginning of the crisis, officials in both the GVN and the U.S. government considered the resettlement of the northern migrants in South Vietnam to be a top priority. As late as 1956, in a letter to South Vietnam's Interior Minister, D. C. Lavergne, the International Cooperation Administration's (ICA) Assistant Director in Vietnam, wrote,

We believe . . . that you will agree that the early resettlement and rehabilitation of refugees is of great political and economic importance to the Republic of Vietnam. The magnitude and humanitarian aspects of the problem seem to warrant unusual and emergency measures if the problem is to be solved within a reasonable time with the funds available for this purpose.⁴⁰

As Lavergne's letter indicated, the GVN and U.S. government's commitment to the refugees derived from political considerations about the potentially destabilizing effect of the influx of people and the conviction that through "rehabilitation" the northerners might become strong supporters of Diem's regime. According to this logic, if the regime could effectively incorporate the refugees into South Vietnamese society, the GVN would benefit from having hundreds of thousands of rural Vietnamese who felt indebted to the government for helping them begin new lives in South Vietnam. The refugees, who had actively chosen to leave the communist regime of North Vietnam, embodied precisely the type of staunch anticommunists that Diem and his allies in Washington, DC hoped would inspire loyalty to the GVN among the rest of the South Vietnamese population. In light of Diem's struggle to affirm his legitimacy, the refugees' condemnation of the DRV and of the procommunist factions in the south might provide a powerful model for other Vietnamese. However, such assumptions suggest more about the significant degree of wishful thinking employed by American and South Vietnamese officials than they do about the realities on the ground.

When the northerners arrived in South Vietnam, they proceeded to reception centers located close to the debarkation points. They were later transferred to resettlement camps built further inland by Vietnamese and French troops. There they lived in temporary housing, including pup tents provided by the French military. Months after their initial arrival, the refugees finally moved to permanent relocation sites, where they built their own houses and sought long-term employment.⁴¹ In many cases, these sites had previously been occupied but had been abandoned during periods of heavy fighting in the First Indochina War. Strategic considerations often informed GVN and U.S. officials' selection of specific relocation areas. For example, they established many settlements in Viet Minh

40. D. C. Lavergne to Nguyen Huu Chau, May 18, 1956; Phủ Tổng Thống Đệ Nhất Cộng Hòa, 1955–1963 Series (Papers of the President of the Republic of Vietnam), Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia II (Vietnam's National Archives, Number II) Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (hereafter cited as TTLT-II).

41. *Ibid.*

strongholds, such as the Mekong Delta, or in the Central Highlands, which were primarily populated by ethnic minority groups.⁴²

Officials in South Vietnam's fledgling government quickly recognized the potential political benefits of an influx of people discontented with the North Vietnamese regime. Policymakers in Saigon adopted a bold agenda for integrating the new arrivals into South Vietnamese society. Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, his brother and closest advisor, considered refugee resettlement to be part of a larger "Personalist Revolution," which included ambitious land development projects. The Ngos hoped to develop uninhabited or under populated areas of the Mekong Delta and Central Highlands, and they viewed northern transplants as well suited to play the role of pioneer.⁴³ Vietnam expert Bernard Fall explained the Ngo family's vision a few years after the refugee crisis had ended. He wrote, "refugees would provide much-needed manpower to put into operation long standing plans for the development of the Southern Mountain Plateau (PMS) and of more than 200,000 acres of rice land in the Mekong Delta and the Trans-Bassac area that had lain fallow for almost ten years because of the [First Indochina] war."⁴⁴ Diem also had high hopes for resettling the refugees in the highlands, areas that he considered to be wilderness and populated by uncivilized savages.⁴⁵ According to Diem's vision, settling the northerners in upland areas would not only boost agricultural production there but would also serve the strategic objective of creating a "human wall" between the GVN and its detractors. But, as Hansen's work suggests, many refugees refused to comply with the GVN's plans and instead decided for themselves where they would settle.⁴⁶ Historian Philip Catton's research supports this claim. He explains, "the reluctance of northern refugees to play the role of nation-building pioneers particularly disappointed the palace, which had viewed its coreligionists as perfect settler material."⁴⁷

Like their South Vietnamese counterparts, American officials placed high value on resettling the refugees quickly. They paved the way for a number of public and private American organizations to provide assistance for refugees once they arrived in South Vietnam. The U.S. government aid agency's in-country team, the United States Operations Mission (USOM), worked closely with South Vietnamese officials to coordinate resettlement projects. Beginning in 1955, a group of academics from Michigan State University, who were under contract with the U.S.

42. For a discussion of the perceived benefits of these areas for resettlement, see, for example, Barrows to Cardinaux, October 5, 1956, NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 2; Lavergne, "Special Projects," January 21, 1957, NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 5.

43. For more on the Diem and Nhu's ideas about Personalism and the connections between refugee resettlement and land development, see Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 56–9.

44. Bernard Fall, *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York, 1967), 291.

45. See Gerald Hickey on Diem's attitudes toward ethnic minorities and their practices, especially swidden agriculture, and his desire to civilize them. Gerald Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains* (New Haven, 1982), and *Free in the Forest* (New Haven, 1982).

46. Hansen, "Bắc Đì Cù," 193–201.

47. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 60.

government, also advised the GVN on its refugee policies. Other groups operated at a more grassroots level, frequently interacting with the refugees themselves. Many of these groups were voluntary or religious organizations that distributed food and humanitarian supplies among the refugee communities. They included the IRC, the Mennonite Central Committee, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the World Church Service, and the American Women's Association.⁴⁸ After its introduction to Vietnam in 1956, the International Voluntary Services (IVS) helped construct permanent villages for the refugees and provided technical assistance in agricultural development. IVS and other nongovernmental organizations also functioned as informal mediators by providing a connection between GVN or U.S. officials and the refugees, and ensuring that material aid reached the refugee communities that needed help. As one IVS volunteer later recalled, "every type of work imaginable was done then . . . construction work, establishment of livestock and crop programs, and community development."⁴⁹

Although both contemporary observers and scholars have focused on the positive working relationships between the GVN and Americans during the early years of the alliance, the two sides did not always agree, especially on issues related to financing refugee resettlement. There were significant disputes over how much responsibility each party should have in subsidizing resettlement programs as well as how to distribute and account for specific project funds.⁵⁰ This second point of contention illuminated fundamental differences about how to implement the refugee programs and, by extension, about each partner's vision for how nation building should proceed. As internal GVN correspondence shows, the Vietnamese generally favored a decentralized model, in which locally elected committees would distribute funds and oversee the execution of specific projects.⁵¹ On the other hand, most Americans argued that the complex and delicate circumstances of administering aid funds called for the expertise of trained accountants and

48. U.S. MAAG, "Campaign for Freedom," NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 1.

49. Donald Sumner newsletter, June 29, 1959, IVS Documents, McLean, VA, in the possession of Anne Shirk, former Executive Director of IVS (hereafter cited as IVS). For more information on IVS work with refugees, see Wilbur Thomas, *The Vietnam Story of International Voluntary Services, Inc.* (Washington, DC, 1972) and Jessica Elkind, *The First Casualties: American Nation Building Programs in South Vietnam, 1955-1965* (PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2005), 102-14.

50. With regard to the first issue—funding refugee programs—Vietnamese officials argued that their American counterparts expected the GVN cover resettlement costs for which they simply lacked adequate money. Internal GVN correspondence illustrates this point. See, for example, Bui Van Luong to Ngo Dinh Diem, October 25, 1955, TTLT-II.

51. According to this plan, the refugee village administrative committees, comprised at least three residents who had been elected by their neighbors, had the authority to choose the firms and contractors and to decide on other particular details of the projects for their villages. However, the committees were bound by their obligation to fulfill the fundamental aims of the given project, to preserve all essential records, and to submit regular reports to COMIGAL. This plan mirrored the basic decentralized structure of public administration in Vietnam at the time and conformed to existing patterns of local government in the provinces. For a description of the plan by GVN officials, see Tran Huu Phong to Ngo Dinh Diem, June 1, 1956, TTLT-II.

bookkeepers, rather than inexperienced committees that had simply won a popular vote.⁵² The Americans' opposition to village control over financial decision making reflected a bureaucratic sensibility that valued professional expertise over local knowledge and suggested a basic disregard for or lack of trust in local processes, as well as a concern over the competence of local people.⁵³ Ultimately, the Vietnamese model won out, as the GVN refused to comply with American recommendations, and USOM put up very little protest to the GVN's decision to shift many of the provincial delegates' duties to the refugee village administrative committees.⁵⁴ While some differences of opinion should be expected, these disputes pointed to a basic incompatibility in the different approaches that Vietnamese and Americans officials took regarding local power and control, and they foreshadowed future ruptures in the partnership.

Resettling the refugees in South Vietnam proved far more challenging than encouraging them to move or physically transporting them south. Most of the complications associated with debarkation and resettlement stemmed from the fact that the GVN was ill-prepared and lacked the experience to deal with such a large undertaking.⁵⁵ The South Vietnamese police personnel stationed at the debarkation points were, according to American observers, relatively unhelpful in assisting with the process of moving people off the boats and into reception centers. Instead, local Vietnamese youth organizations won high praise from American observers for their contributions to the orderly and efficient debarkation of refugees. Similarly, American officials commended Vietnamese Catholic priests, who provided "invaluable service marked by efficient, cooperative and sympathetic relationships with all U.S. agencies involved."⁵⁶ These phenomena confirm the low state capacity of the GVN, on which many American aid workers commented at the time. They also suggest a more organized and diverse array of groups functioning in civil society than the conventional scholarship usually acknowledges.

Despite their relatively high socioeconomic position in the north, many refugees arrived in South Vietnam destitute and without any local contacts to help

52. The Michigan State team was particularly outspoken in its criticism of the village committees. MSU advisors considered the appointment of trained professionals as a key antidote to the perennial problems of corruption and embezzlement that seemed to plague refugee assistance programs. In an attempt to address these problems, the Michigan State group advised the Refugee Commissariat to appoint provincial delegates to control expenditures and supervise the distribution of funds. According to MSU's recommendations, these delegates would be licensed experts and accountable to the central government. MSU Vietnam Technical Assistance Project, "Review of Recommendations Concerning Proposed Field Organization of the Commissariat for Refugees of September 20, 1955," June 29, 1956, TTLT-II.

53. For more on the conflict between expertise and local knowledge, see James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998).

54. MSU Vietnam Technical Assistance Project, "Review of Recommendations Concerning Proposed Field Organization of the Commissariat for Refugees of September 20, 1955," June 29, 1956, TTLT-II. MSU advisors were dismayed at USOM's acquiescence. For their reaction, see Walter Mode to Wesley Fishel, September 14, 1956, MSUG-VPP, box 675, folder 21.

55. U.S. MAAG, "Campaign for Freedom," NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 1.

56. *Ibid.*



Figure 2: USS Bayfield docks at Saigon, South Vietnam to offload refugees in September, 1954. Photo courtesy of the National Archives, Naval Historical Foundation Photographic Services, Washington, D.C.

them begin new lives. According to Walter Mode, a member of the Michigan State team, both Diem and his American advisors considered the refugee movement a “critical situation.” Mode estimated that five thousand new refugees entered South Vietnam each day. Saigon’s port served as one of the primary entry points for the northerners, and the city’s population burgeoned as a result of the flood of new arrivals. According to Mode, before the GVN created effective refugee centers, between one and two thousand people slept in the Saigon Assembly Building each night. All other public spaces in the city swelled with refugees, and no buildings remained vacant once the northerners began arriving.⁵⁷

To deal with the massive logistical and social problems caused by the barrage of people entering the country (figure 2), Diem established a new federal agency called the Commissariat General for Refugees, which was widely referred to by its French acronym, COMIGAL. During the first few months of its existence, COMIGAL was plagued with instability and lacked a coherent vision of its mission. As of late September 1954, there had already been four Refugee

⁵⁷. Walter Mode, “Review of MSUG Field Administration Division Vietnam, July 1955-June 1957,” MSUG-VPP, box 1209, folder 21.

Commissioners who each offered a different plan for how the agency should deal with the refugee problem.⁵⁸ Such problems likely reflected the general volatility of the new South Vietnamese government, as well as Diem's tenuous hold on power at the time. The chaos passed, however, as Diem's administration consolidated its authority, and by mid-1955 COMIGAL had a clear direction and strong leadership. At that time, thirty-seven local units reported directly to Bui Van Luong, a personal friend of Diem and a Catholic, who remained director of the agency for the remainder of its existence.⁵⁹ Initially, COMIGAL's primary responsibility was to create refugee centers and provide basic building supplies for the new immigrants. The broader aims of the agency focused on a program of assimilation, in which the northerners would be integrated into South Vietnamese society.

During its three-year existence, COMIGAL oversaw the establishment of 319 permanent refugee villages, in which over 605,000 people settled. The remaining 300,000 refugees resettled themselves without significant assistance from COMIGAL, mostly in Saigon and other southern cities. Some of these refugees may have had preexisting family ties in the south; others likely relied on their own resourcefulness to make a new life. The Mekong Delta contained the vast majority of the COMIGAL villages, and most inhabitants were farmers. In addition to 207 villages in the delta, 50 refugee villages were created on the central coast and 62 in the highlands.⁶⁰ Although hundreds of thousands of refugees had been settled, nearly all of the newcomers still faced significant hardships. According to a report issued by COMIGAL in late 1955, most refugees engaged in farming or fishing, but they lacked field implements, seeds, livestock, and fishing equipment. All of the refugee centers needed schools, teachers, and hospitals, and many camps lacked enough water to cultivate the fields.⁶¹

While some problems, such as inadequate healthcare and educational opportunities, were commonplace in all of the centers, the refugees' experiences varied significantly depending on where they had relocated. According to COMIGAL, the 33,000 refugees who had settled in camps in the Central Highlands enjoyed a relatively high standard of living compared with those living elsewhere. This distinction likely stemmed from the fact that the highlands camps were among the first refugee centers built. Created in late 1954, soon after the refugee crisis began, these camps benefited from more experienced administrators and well-established

58. "Report of Division Chiefs Meeting," September 24, 1954, NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 1.

59. The fact that Bui Van Luong was later appointed Commissioner for Land Development in South Vietnam demonstrates the links between refugee resettlement and other GVN development programs.

60. Of the 319 COMIGAL refugee villages, 288 were identified as primarily agricultural settlements, twenty-six were fishing villages, and five were established to house artisans and craftspeople. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 16.

61. Report on Conference of Commissariat for Refugees, October 12, 1955, MSUG-VPP, box 657, folder 24.

compounds.⁶² Northern transplants who settled along the central coast, particularly those who lived near the city of Nha Trang and the port of Cam Ranh Bay, also enjoyed advantages over newcomers to other areas. In particular, they profited from their proximity to diverse natural resources, rich fishing areas, and surplus farmland.⁶³ Furthermore, many of the refugees who settled along the central coast were fishermen. As Wiesner explains, refugees who earned a living through fishing tended to fare well because they did not need large tracts of land and required only a small investment in order to become productive citizens.⁶⁴

On the other hand, northerners who settled in the Mekong Delta and other areas close to Saigon seemed to suffer greater hardship. A Michigan State survey conducted in several refugee villages in the delta highlighted some of these obstacles. According to this survey, residents of many villages in Vinh Long province had no farmland, sanitation facilities, or lumber to build houses. Refugee camps in Ben Tre lacked potable water and basic medical supplies. One report from the area illuminated the seemingly insurmountable obstacles facing refugees. These people required such fundamental necessities as “DDT, wells, electricity, homes, and jobs.”⁶⁵ Ultimately, then, the successes of the refugee episode were accompanied by serious problems.

IGNORING THE FAILURES OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

Driven by confidence in their methods and an eagerness to believe Diem was the right man to support, American policymakers failed to see three primary shortcomings of the refugee resettlement program. First, they overestimated the degree to which northerners were integrated into South Vietnamese society, in part because they lacked an effective means of measuring the refugees’ assimilation. Second, they overlooked how the GVN’s refugee policies worsened Diem’s political standing in the countryside and exacerbated tensions between local communities and the refugees. Finally, American policymakers ignored how these tensions sparked increased antigovernment violence, which threatened basic security and the very survival of the state.

THE CHALLENGES OF ASSIMILATION

The central elements of the GVN and American officials’ shared vision on how to handle the refugee situation reflected their conviction that the ultimate goal should be for the refugees to become completely self-sufficient and be incorporated into local communities. Accordingly, COMIGAL tried to prevent the refugee communities from developing their own administrative units. Instead, existing districts were supposed to absorb these new communities. Furthermore, Diem established

62. Ibid.

63. Evans to Hackett, November 2, 1956, MSGU-VPP, box 674, folder 28.

64. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 15.

65. Can Tho Survey, no date, MSUG-VPP, box 675, folder 35.

the Refugee Commissariat as a temporary solution to the refugee problem, with the understanding that the life of the agency would be limited to the immediate crisis period. By mid-1956, the Michigan State group advised the Vietnamese government that “planning for the orderly dissolution of COMIGAL should begin immediately.” COMIGAL anticipated this recommendation and began to transfer some of its functions to permanent government agencies.⁶⁶

Other American aid workers concurred with the GVN and MSUG approach to refugee resettlement. As Leland Barrows, the director of USOM, explained to the GVN Committee on Foreign Aid, “This is not a program of public assistance to indigents but a program for aiding the refugees to put themselves through their own efforts in a position to earn a living.”⁶⁷ One project agreement between the U.S. government and the GVN, which dealt with aid to the village of Long Phuoc Thon in Gia Dinh province, stipulated that U.S. material assistance to the village was “intended to make fully self-supporting 858 refugee families or 4,473 persons within a period of from 6-9 months.”⁶⁸ A report issued by COMIGAL in October 1955, explained, “the refugees are supposed, within the near future, to identify themselves with the local people.”⁶⁹ Policymakers in Saigon and Washington valued assimilation not only because it represented a successful resolution to the refugee crisis but also because the refugees’ integration into the society meant that presumed government loyalists would be spread throughout the country.

However, the twin goals of self-sufficiency and integration were not necessarily mutually reinforcing. It was entirely possible that a group of northerners might become self-sufficient, especially in cases in which whole villages or parishes moved together. Many such groups seemed to develop a cohesive community, often based on the strong organization of the Catholic Church, which took care of its own members and did not depend on outside support. However, many groups of northerners exhibited signs of independence without becoming assimilated into the broader society. In fact, by conflating self-sufficiency and integration, GVN and U.S. officials obscured basic shortcomings of the entire resettlement endeavor. They could, and in many cases did, assume that northerners had been accepted into local communities once they no longer relied upon or received government assistance.

One of the major difficulties American and Vietnamese observers had when evaluating refugee projects was determining whether and when refugees had been

66. For example, in mid-1956, COMIGAL transferred responsibility for providing medical services to refugees to the GVN Ministry of Health. MSU Vietnam Technical Assistance Project, “Review of Recommendations Concerning Proposed Field Organization of the Commissariat for Refugees of September 20, 1955,” June 29, 1956, TFLT-II.

67. Barrows, MSUG-VPP.

68. “Project Agreement between the Foreign Operations Administration, an agency of the Government of the United States of America, and the Committee for Foreign Aid, an agency of the Government of Vietnam,” project number 30-82-075, January 1956, TFLT-II.

69. Report on Conference of Commissariat for Refugees, October 12, 1955, MSUG-VPP, box 657, folder 24.

rehabilitated or integrated into the society. For example, the Michigan State group routinely produced positive assessments of refugee resettlement, particularly in Central Vietnam. These reports, though, provided little evidence to support the claims of success. In late 1956, one member of the Michigan State University (MSU) team visited several camps along the central coast. After conducting interviews and observing four villages in Khanh Hoa province, he concluded that 80 percent of the 20,000 refugees living in those communities had been “rehabilitated” and integrated into “regular life.” Similarly, the Michigan State advisor found that the 100,000 refugees residing in twenty villages in Binh Thuan province had been “rehabilitated well,” in spite of the fact that they had no access to technical services and that aid money had not been distributed evenly. According to MSU’s report, refugees in the relatively wealthy province of Ninh Thuan had fared even better. These 20,000 people were “completely integrated into the communities and are no longer classified as refugees.”⁷⁰

The Michigan State report credited the success of refugees in these provinces to the fact that the area had received extensive U.S. aid and could accommodate more people because of a surplus of previously unused land. Furthermore, the report cited the wealth of natural resources in the region, as well as the fact that the central coast saw less insurgent activity and was relatively safer than other areas of South Vietnam. Although the Michigan State group offered possible explanations for why these refugees had fared so well, their report contained no explanation of the standards used by MSU or COMIGAL to judge whether refugees had been “rehabilitated.” Instead of providing concrete examples to demonstrate the effectiveness of U.S. aid, advisors from Michigan State and other organizations appealed to U.S. and GVN officials’ affinity for statistics, however meaningless, and their expectations of a successful outcome to the refugee situation. As this example suggests, American policymakers and aid workers convinced themselves into believing that their efforts played a major role in resettling the refugees.

In fact, the success that northern transplants did achieve often depended far more on their own resourcefulness and the preferential treatment they received from the GVN than on the efforts of U.S. aid workers. As one U.S. official explained, “the remarkable resiliency” of individual refugees proved more instrumental than any support the GVN or United States could provide them.⁷¹ However, despite positive assessments such as the MSU report discussed above, over a year after the crisis began, the U.S. aid agency found that only “a very small number [of refugees] have been able to create a new independent existence.”⁷²

70. Evans to Hackett, November 2, 1956, MSUG-VPP, box 674, folder 28.

71. Barrows to Cardinaux, May 13, 1955, NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 1.

72. Briefing book for visit of John Hollister (Director of the International Cooperation Administration) compiled by Raymond Miller, October 25, 1955, NARA record group 469, entry 461, box 1.

TENSIONS BETWEEN REFUGEES AND LOCALS

Instead of becoming integrated into their communities, the refugees' arrival seemed to generate profound tensions between the northerners and locals and to contribute to Diem's political troubles. Because many of his countrymen saw him not as a patriot but as a repressive leader who favored the Catholic minority and invited foreign intervention, Diem never earned widespread popular support, and he faced a growing antigovernment insurgency. In fact, beginning at the time of the refugee crisis, Diem brought many of these problems on himself through ill-conceived policies, including the preferential treatment of northern Catholics. As historian John Prados explains, "Diem naturally gravitated to the northerners, favored them, and expected their loyalty."⁷³ However, Diem's treatment of the northerners had serious consequences for his political prospects in South Vietnam. According to one scholar, "Diem's favoritism for the northerners was one of the major articles in the later indictment against him."⁷⁴ Instead of resulting in the refugees' assimilation and widespread political support, GVN resettlement efforts often bred animosity toward the newcomers and alienated the local population from Diem's government.

Beginning in early 1955, the GVN decided not to permit any more refugees to settle in Ben Tre province in the Mekong Delta because of generally poor security and strained relations between the refugees and local population. A Michigan State report described the local people as "antagonistic" toward refugees in many villages. In one area of Ben Tre, the established community refused to allow refugees to use the village well, thus making it quite difficult for refugees to find sources of potable water.⁷⁵ In another dramatic and violent episode, some of Diem's political rivals attacked refugees, probably as a form of retribution against palace crack-downs on their activities. On July 31, 1955, in the wake of their military defeat in Saigon, members of the Binh Xuyen group burned the village of Phuoc-Ly.⁷⁶ Phuoc-Ly was one of the first permanent refugee villages created in South Vietnam and served as a symbol of pro-Catholic government policies. As a result of the Binh Xuyen attack, 190 houses were destroyed and 2,400 recently resettled northerners were left homeless.⁷⁷ These examples reveal the intensity of Diem's political problems. With entire communities demonstrating their hostility toward the government or the refugees, it would be very difficult for COMIGAL and American aid workers to expect those refugees to be accepted into the community, much less inspire popular support for the GVN.

73. John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago, 1995), 20.

74. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 52.

75. Can Tho Survey, no date, MSUG-VPP, box 675, folder 35.

76. The Binh Xuyen was a criminal organization that operated in and around Saigon. For more on the Binh Xuyen, see George Kahin and Jessica Chapman, "Staging Democracy: South Vietnam's 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai," *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 4 (September 2006): 671-703.

77. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 13.

The practice of providing subsistence payments to refugees also presented numerous problems for the GVN and the refugees themselves. Upon their arrival, the northern migrants received a small subsistence allowance to help cover their most pressing needs. During the first few months of the resettlement period, this allowance amounted to 10 piasters per day for each person. However, officials quickly discovered the complications involved in distributing the stipend, especially once refugees moved throughout the country to permanent relocation areas. Beginning in the fall of 1954, refugees received a lump sum of 800 piasters when they arrived in South Vietnam. As further enticement, northerners willing to resettle in the highlands were given an additional 200 piasters.⁷⁸

According to an USOM report, the subsistence allowances the refugees received while they were in reception camps surpassed the daily income of most Vietnamese peasants. As a result, many refugees resisted moving from reception camps to permanent resettlement areas or villages, where they would no longer be eligible for the allowance. Furthermore, the allowances produced a significant disparity between the refugees, who at least for a time enjoyed cash payments from the government, and the rest of the rural population, who received no hand-outs and in some cases had very few public services at their disposal.⁷⁹ This disparity probably contributed to resentment on the part of the established population toward the northern transplants.

Diem compounded such political dilemmas by adopting policies that openly favored Catholic migrants over non-Catholic refugees and southerners. Catholics generally enjoyed more support than Buddhist refugees, who were often overlooked and received less financial and material assistance from COMIGAL than their Catholic counterparts.⁸⁰ According to a Michigan State report on refugees in the delta's Can Tho province, Buddhist refugees "[were] left out" of government resettlement programs. The report stated, "Buddhists do not seem to be receiving the same treatment as others."⁸¹ In addition to receiving less money than the Catholics, Buddhist refugees enjoyed far less influence over the implementation of resettlement projects. With the aid of American organizations such as the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Diem's regime attempted to give parish priests more control over administering and financing refugee projects than "expert" technical advisors from COMIGAL or the Michigan State group.⁸²

Furthermore, Diem's government exhibited preferential treatment toward Catholic refugees at the expense of the established communities. In many cases, the GVN provided the refugees with basic amenities that the local populations lacked. In addition to the subsistence payments, refugees received construction

78. In 1954, 35.5 piasters equaled \$1. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 7.

79. "Report of Division Chiefs' Meeting," September 24, 1954, NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 1.

80. Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance*, 28.

81. Can Tho Survey, no date, MSUG-VPP, box 675, folder 35.

82. Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance*, 28-9.

materials to build their houses and equipment such as farming or fishing implements. To make matters worse, Diem also replaced many local leaders who had held prestigious and influential positions within the provincial and village administrative system with Catholic northerners. This widely unpopular policy resulted in the creation of what one scholar and participant in the MSU technical assistance group has called a “carpetbag government” in the south.⁸³ These policies likely contributed to tensions between refugees and locals and helped foster the perception that Diem did not have the best interests of the majority in mind.

Many Catholic refugees demonstrated their determination to prevail over the hostility of local communities and the economic hardships they faced by remaining in certain areas of the country. For example, one group of refugees had settled on the property of a Catholic Church in Vinh Long province, in the Mekong Delta. Although these refugees had no land on which they could establish farms or raise livestock, they also had “no desire to relocate.” Nearby, another group of 800 refugees lived on privately owned land. The province chief paid their rent out of his own pocket, so that the northerners could remain in their new homes. Although these people had no access to farmland, sanitation facilities, or building materials, they also chose to stay in that village rather than move elsewhere.⁸⁴ These anecdotes suggest that many refugees refused to give in to social or economic pressure to leave the areas in which they settled and instead remained despite the hostility of local people, perhaps because they doubted their prospects elsewhere.

Despite their reluctance to succumb to local hostilities by moving to a different area, many refugees appear to have retained their northern identity and envisioned themselves as only temporary inhabitants of the south. According to Louis Wiesner, refugees “did not lose their identity in the South.” Instead, they arrived in groups, and villages or parishes settled together.⁸⁵ As Catton explains, many refugees hoped partition would be temporary and they would be able to move back to their original homes at some point.⁸⁶ The fact that many refugees anticipated returning to the north, settled as intact groups, and retained many aspects of northern culture suggests that few were fully integrated into local communities.

83. Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress* (Boston, 1964), 54. George Kahin provides a good description of Diem’s decision to abolish elections for village councils in mid-1956 and allow the Interior Ministry to appoint northern transplants as local officials. Kahin, *Intervention*, 98–101. Even at the national level, refugees enjoyed advantages in winning coveted positions in the government. As James Carter writes “most governmental positions went, in fact, to either the Catholic minority that now ringed Saigon as recent refugees and/or the Ngo family.” James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam*, (Cambridge, 2008), 59.

84. Can Tho Survey, no date, MSUG-VPP, box 675, folder 35.

85. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 9. Hansen’s research also supports this claim. Hansen, “Bắc Đì Cù,” 193–201.

86. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 61.

VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY

In some cases, severe animosity toward northern transplants and aid workers seeking to help them threatened to undermine the entire resettlement endeavor in that area. The Cai San development in the Mekong Delta provides a particularly striking example of the effects of local opposition to refugee resettlement. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, South Vietnamese and American officials touted Cai San as a success, and the area became an important model for their future land development projects. But Cai San was also the site of some of the worst antirefugee and antigovernment violence during the first years of Diem's regime.

Despite the challenges facing refugees relocating to the Mekong Delta, policymakers encouraged resettlement in the region by funding large-scale projects. The most notable of these projects was the Cai San resettlement area, which straddled the provinces of Kien Giang and An Giang in the southwestern corner of the country. Officials intended the settlement at Cai San to absorb over 10 percent of all the northern refugees and to serve as a model for other land development schemes. Based on a plan originally conceived by American officials at USOM, Diem expressed his "unqualified approval" for Cai San.⁸⁷ This area consisted of sixteen canals that branched off of larger waterways. Immediately prior to the influx of northerners, the particular location of Cai San village had been uninhabited, probably because it was abandoned during the First Indochina War. According to the MSU group, the Cai San project was designed to "exploit untouched or abandoned tracts" of land in this fertile part of the country.⁸⁸

The Vietnamese government converted the unused land into rice paddies crisscrossed by inland waterways. Around those channels, officials then created sprawling villages in which to settle the refugees. The GVN paid refugees to dig the canals and provided each family with a frame for a house and materials to build a thatched roof.⁸⁹ Each family also received 3 hectares (7.5 acres) of land in tenancy. The government envisioned that the newcomers would clear and cultivate the land, and then later they would be able to purchase the property in installments.⁹⁰

Initial plans called for 100,000 people to be resettled in Cai San by May 1957. As of August 1956, 40,000 refugees lived along the canals and used them for transportation, fishing, and irrigation.⁹¹ They grew rice and other crops nearby, on the land they had been loaned by COMIGAL. The Catholic parishes that

87. "Cai San Resettlement Plan," no date, NARA record group 469, entry 461, box 1.

88. MSU Vietnam Technical Assistance Project, "Review of Recommendations Concerning Proposed Field Organization of the Commissariat for Refugees of September 20, 1955," June 29, 1956, TTLT-II.

89. Gerald Hickey, *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict* (Lubbock, 2002), 26-7.

90. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 15.

91. "Cai San Resettlement Plan," no date, NARA record group 469, entry 461, box 1.

sprung up along each canal were the central focus of each neighborhood, and the priests that served each parish became the community leaders.⁹²

Initially, at least, GVN and U.S. officials considered the refugee settlement at Cai San a success. The area became an anticommunist stronghold and an island of pro-government sentiment in the middle of a territory where the Viet Minh enjoyed great control and support. As a result, Cai San served as a showpiece for the entire refugee resettlement program, and Vietnamese officials as well as foreigners often toured its villages.⁹³ An article published in July 1955 in the English language newspaper *Vietnam Press* painted a glowing picture of the progress at Cai San. The article's Vietnamese author reported that in the two canals of Cai San he visited, "houses spring up like mushrooms and the gardens are covered with vegetable beans of a wonderful green."⁹⁴

Vietnamese and American officials also touted Cai San as a model for future strategic development projects. In a presentation delivered in June 1956 before the Vietnamese Committee on Foreign Aid, USOM's director Leland Barrows praised the progress that Cai San's refugees had made. Barrows discussed the general achievements of the refugees at Cai San and recommended that the area be used as an example for other development endeavors. He argued that the positive experience of Cai San encouraged him to think about other instances in which the GVN could institute "rapid redevelopment and re-occupation of idle land." According to Barrows, reclaiming unoccupied land and providing peasants with the opportunity to develop productive farms on that land presented the Vietnamese government with a strategy for improving the political and military situation while simultaneously contributing to the country's economic base.⁹⁵ The MSU group also praised the project at Cai San, arguing that it "offer[ed] the possibility of relocating and rehabilitating thousands of refugees who are now located in unsatisfactory sites . . . the Commissariat merits high praise for assigning a high priority to these development projects."⁹⁶ In the following years, American and Vietnamese policymakers would attempt to replicate the approach they had used with the refugees at Cai San in their other efforts to relocate Vietnamese peasants for tactical purposes.⁹⁷

However, Cai San was not the peaceful and idyllic paradise that policymakers and reporters made it out to be. Cai San had grown from a rural outpost to a

92. Gene Myers newsletter, October 21, 1957, IVS.

93. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, 15.

94. *Vietnam Press* article, July 26, 1955, MSUG-VPP, box 657, folder 72.

95. Barrows, MSUG-VPP.

96. MSU Vietnam Technical Assistance Project, "Review of Recommendations Concerning Proposed Field Organization of the Commissariat for Refugees of September 20, 1955," June 29, 1956, TTLT-II.

97. Catton demonstrates how the Ngo family saw refugee resettlement a part of a larger project of land development, and, in doing so, he illustrates many of the direct links between the refugee period and later policies, especially in the Mekong Delta and highlands. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 56–7.

bustling village overnight. Gerald Hickey, an anthropologist and member of the Michigan State group who visited the area soon after it was developed, described Cai San as having a “boom town character.” He explained that making the journey there from Saigon felt like traveling to the “frontier.”⁹⁸ As often occurs in frontier or boomtown areas, however, a significant amount of lawlessness and violence transpired in Cai San. This high level of violence, which was often directed at GVN officials but sometimes targeted at the refugees or American aid workers, challenged the narrative of Cai San as an unqualified success.

Numerous USOM documents cited high levels of unrest and “hostile activities” in and around Cai San.⁹⁹ Some refugees simply refused to move to Cai San, presumably because of the political tensions and violence in the area.¹⁰⁰ In one nearly fatal attack, several South Vietnamese soldiers traveling to Cai San were wounded when their jeep was hit by small arms fire. Apparently, Diem believed that the intended target of the ambush was actually USOM’s director, Leland Barrows, whose own jeep reached the site of the attack a mere three minutes after the unfortunate South Vietnamese soldiers.¹⁰¹ Regardless of whether the real target was the government soldiers or an American aid worker, this incident illustrates the general instability near Cai San and the fact that opposition groups did not shy away from the use of aggressive or intimidating tactics. American and South Vietnamese officials could not identify the instigators of this violence or others like it. However, they used such attacks to justify heavy-handed policies designed to locate and eliminate their opponents. This episode previewed the increasing attacks on government officials—and eventually on their American advisors as well—and the Diem regime’s responses that developed into a full-blown civil war throughout the rural areas of South Vietnam during the subsequent years.

Despite violence of this sort, Vietnamese and American aid workers continued to focus on Cai San’s potential for resettlement and redevelopment. From the inception of its mission in Vietnam, the IVS was heavily invested in the area. Beginning in late 1956, the IVS agricultural group became particularly involved in efforts to rehabilitate refugees at Cai San. One of the two IVS teams assigned to refugee resettlement work was stationed at Cai San, and these volunteers lived there for several months at a time. The volunteers built demonstration gardens and created communal agricultural areas. They established small orchards and nurseries and then distributed saplings to local refugee families, participated in a GVN-sponsored poultry program, and offered instruction in fishing

98. Hickey, *Window on a War*, 26.

99. “Hostile activities” quote from Adler “Viet Minh Activity, Province of Gia Dinh,” December 30, 1955, NARA record group 469, entry 1455, box 1. See also R. A. Nichols to Lavergne, “Obstacles to Recovery in the Southern Provinces,” September 12, 1956, NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 2, and Lavergne, “Special Projects,” January 21, 1957, NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 5.

100. Barrows to Cardinaux, October 5, 1956, NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 2.

101. Lansdale to Barrows, “Incident Near Long Xuyen,” October 4, 1956, NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 2.

techniques.¹⁰² IVSers would adopt this same approach to their efforts at economic development elsewhere in South Vietnam during the subsequent decade and a half.

Ultimately, however, IVS efforts at Cai San were cut short because of political problems and violence. On August 31, 1957, IVS closed its Cai San station and moved the volunteers working there to Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands. The organization cited “insecurity” in the region as the official rationale for the closure. In addition to religious and political tensions in the settlement, in mid-1957 riots broke out among Cai San refugees. The northerners were enraged to learn that, contrary to what they had previously been told, the GVN required them to purchase the land on which they lived and farmed.¹⁰³ IVS apparently had other reasons for withdrawing its volunteers from Cai San as well. According to the organization’s final report for the Vietnam mission, volunteers stationed at Cai San were “unaware of the position of authority exercised by the Roman Catholic priests over the settlers,” and the Americans “aroused resentment from a few village leaders.”¹⁰⁴

The riots at Cai San and IVS’ decision to abandon its operation there point to a number of significant problems underlying the entire refugee resettlement endeavor. Local communities as well as some American aid workers often resented the excessive influence wielded by Catholic priests and their congregations.¹⁰⁵ Local people also reacted against the favoritism shown by the GVN toward the settlers, especially the Catholics among them. At the same time, many of the refugees felt that the South Vietnamese government had misled them and that their needs were not being met. Much of the antigovernment sentiment, if not the violence it engendered, resulted directly from these flaws in the implementation of the refugee resettlement program and GVN policies toward the northern transplants.

MISPLACED OPTIMISM AND LESSONS (NOT) LEARNED

Despite these shortcomings, many American officials celebrated the accomplishments, however limited, of refugee resettlement as representative of a larger success story. They viewed the entire refugee program as an example of how well

102. Gene Myers newsletter, October 21, 1957; Robert Yates newsletter, August 27, 1957; IVS.

103. Bernard Fall, *Vietnam Witness, 1956-1963* (New York, 1966), 180; Thomas, *The Vietnam Story*, 119.

104. Thomas, *Ibid.*, 119.

105. There were even tensions related to the issue of Catholic influence among American organizations working in Vietnam. A feud erupted between USOM and the CRS in mid-1955, largely as a result of “differences of opinion, regarding refugee resettlement” between the U.S. government aid workers and the Catholic volunteers and their leader, Monsignor Harnett. USOM officials criticized CRS management of a food-surplus project, and CRS leadership charged that “government aid to the refugees is ineffectual.” See Lavergne to Gardner Palmer, April 16, 1956; Lavergne to Barrows, April 15, 1956, and the CRS Monthly Narrative Report, March 1956; all documents in NARA record group 469, entry 1453, box 2.

Diem's regime could handle difficult situations and of the role that U.S. aid projects could play in supporting the South Vietnamese government. Just two years after the refugee crisis began, the U.S. government terminated its support for resettlement programs, based on the projection that all refugees would soon be settled and integrated into South Vietnamese society.¹⁰⁶ By 1957, most of the northern transplants had been moved from reception centers and resettled in permanent villages throughout South Vietnam. The following year, COMIGAL, the South Vietnamese bureau that had been created to oversee the resettlement programs, broadened its responsibilities and was renamed the Commissariat General for Land Development. Similarly the U.S. aid agency's Resettlement Section became the Land Development Division.¹⁰⁷ In 1956, USOM Director Leland Barrows concluded that American efforts to help the GVN with refugee resettlement had been effective. He stated, "Undoubtedly, this program compares favorably with any of the several mass refugee movements to which the United States has contributed its assistance."¹⁰⁸

The perceptions of American policymakers and aid workers about the success of refugee resettlement had significant implications for future American involvement in Vietnam, not least of which was to justify continued intervention. The plight of the northern migrants engaged the sympathies of many Americans, and the experience of helping them establish new lives lent a humanitarian dimension to U.S. nation-building efforts in South Vietnam. Most importantly, the joint accomplishments of the GVN and American aid organizations reinforced in the minds of many U.S. policymakers the wisdom and feasibility of supporting Diem and the efficacy of foreign assistance. In a 1956 speech, the then-Senator John F. Kennedy congratulated the Diem government on its accomplishments in dealing with the refugees, who he described as "courageous people dedicated to the free way of life." He said, in recounting the GVN's achievements during the previous two years, "Most striking of all, perhaps, has been the rehabilitation of more than ¾ of a million refugees from the North."¹⁰⁹ *The Pentagon Papers*, the U.S. Defense Department's definitive internal report on early U.S. involvement in Vietnam, reflected a similar laudatory and positive attitude. The report explained, "U.S. officials defending American aid programs could point with pride to the refugee episode to demonstrate the special eligibility of the Vietnamese for U.S. help, including an early, convincing demonstration that Diem's government could mount an effective program with U.S. aid."¹¹⁰ And as materials issued by the International Cooperation Administration at the end of 1956 stated, "the groundwork has been laid for long-range progress in economic rehabilitation and

106. Barrows, MSUG-VPP.

107. Thomas, *The Vietnam Story*, 112, 122.

108. Barrows, MSUG-VPP.

109. John F. Kennedy's Remarks at the Conference on Vietnam at the Willard Hotel, Washington, DC, June 1, 1956, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy*.

110. *The Pentagon Papers*, 248.

development.” However, despite (or perhaps because of) their claims of success in the refugee crisis, the aid workers were quick to justify their continued involvement in Vietnam, as well as to request ongoing funding from the U.S. government for their activities. Their report acknowledged that South Vietnam’s development would require “aid of a considerable magnitude” for years to follow.¹¹¹

As they delivered these self-congratulatory pronouncements, policymakers and aid workers alike overlooked any evidence that conflicted with their narrative of success. They also assumed that their initial positive evaluations of refugee resettlement would hold true in the long term. Not only does this behavior suggest a certain type of wishful thinking on the part of policymakers but also a remarkable shortsightedness about the effects of their actions. For those who paid attention, the resettlement episode offered considerable indications, even at the time, of the problematic nature of the United States–GVN partnership as well as significant defects in how Diem and others in the South Vietnamese government related to rural inhabitants of the country. Ultimately, American policymakers and aid workers chose to ignore such problems in order to justify continued intervention and to ensure political and financial support for their policies in Vietnam.

These findings also implicate the study of diplomatic history and the production of historical knowledge. Like much of the existing scholarship on the Vietnamese refugee crisis, traditional diplomatic histories often concentrate on policy decisions made by high-level government officials. However, by failing to consider fully how those policies were carried out on the ground, scholars too often miss critical elements of the story. The refugee episode in South Vietnam demonstrates the importance of reconstructing how policies functioned in practice as well as how they were conceived in theory. As this study illustrates, by relying on sources beyond the official documents and by focusing on policy implementation, scholars can account for competing perspectives and produce knowledge that both challenges and adds to conventional interpretations.

In the years that followed, the refugee resettlement period served as a model for American nation-builders pursuing technical assistance and economic development programs in South Vietnam. The policymakers and aid workers’ experiences in refugee resettlement fueled a misplaced sense of optimism that colored how those Americans approached their future efforts in Vietnam. Unfortunately, they drew many of the wrong lessons from the episode and formed flawed assumptions that informed later nation-building policies. Most notably, Americans incorrectly assumed that the conditions that led to the limited successes of the resettlement effort would persist in other contexts. But the attitudes of the mostly Catholic refugees did not mirror the sensibilities of the rest of South Vietnam’s population. And although American and GVN officials shared the same basic goals and approach for resettling the northerners, disagreements in subsequent years over how the partnership should function and how South Vietnam should develop severely

111. ICA Briefing Materials, December 28, 1956, NARA record group 469, entry 461, box 1.

hampered their ability to collaborate. For their part, American aid workers would never again enjoy the same degree of support from the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments, the same level of cooperation and acceptance from the local people with whom they worked, or the same feeling of relative political calm throughout the countryside.

Many of the subsequent U.S. nation-building failures in South Vietnam might have been avoided had American policymakers and aid workers taken a more objective view of the refugee episode. Instead, they projected onto the crisis their profound desire for a positive outcome to the overall nation-building experiment in Vietnam. Wishing for success, they exaggerated their own role in refugee efforts, ignored the shortcomings of resettlement programs, and missed the warning signs of what those failures would mean for future U.S. involvement in Vietnam.