

# May 1975:

## What Is Our Responsibility to Vietnamese Refugees?

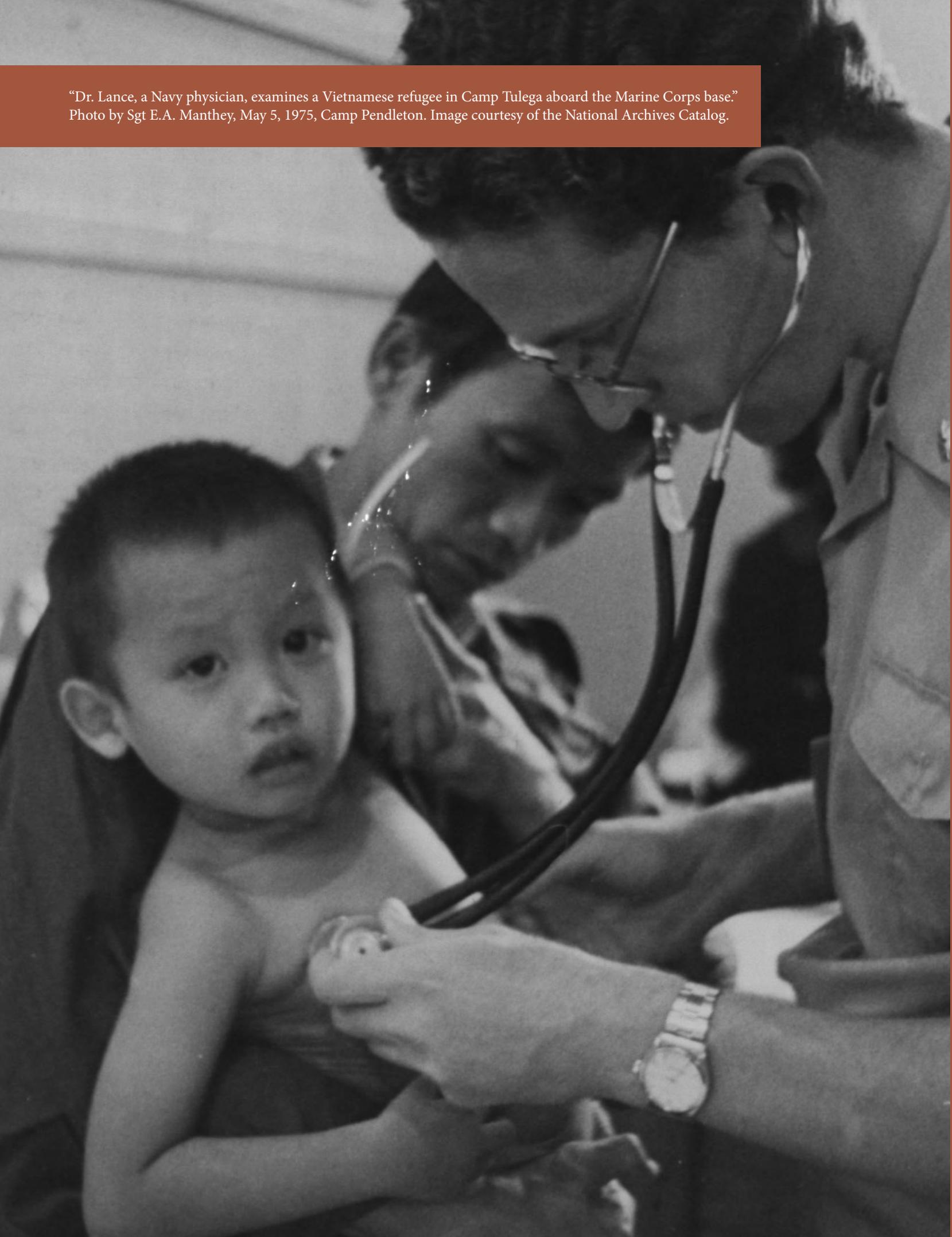
Student Deliberation Guide



President Gerald R. Ford greets Vietnamese orphans at the San Francisco Airport, April 5, 1975.

Image courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum.

“Dr. Lance, a Navy physician, examines a Vietnamese refugee in Camp Tulega aboard the Marine Corps base.”  
Photo by Sgt E.A. Manthey, May 5, 1975, Camp Pendleton. Image courtesy of the National Archives Catalog.



# DELIBERATING THE ISSUE

This issue guide was developed by a team of educators in collaboration with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation whose mission is to support the experimentation needed for the development of innovative ways to advance democracy.

The guide is designed to stimulate deliberation on a controversial historical issue – the American response to the Vietnamese refugee crisis following the final evacuation of Americans from the country in April 1975. The guide outlines three different perspectives that were prominent in the country at the time. Families and communities were divided on how to respond, and participants using this guide will likely be divided as well. Deliberation is not a debate, however, but is an opportunity to weigh the pros and cons of possible solutions and listen to others as they do the same.

## FORUM EXPECTATIONS

- **Everyone is encouraged to participate.**
- **No one or two individuals should dominate.**
- **Address one another, not just the neutral moderator.**
- **Listen carefully to others with respect.**

# INTRODUCTION

Imagine it is May 1975. Our country has been involved in a war for the past decade in Vietnam because we believe it will stop the spread of communism. Over two and a half million American soldiers fought alongside the South Vietnamese against the North Vietnamese, and 58,000 died as a result. We ended our military involvement in this failed effort over two years ago, but we still have approximately 6,000 Americans remaining in South Vietnam.

The war has divided our country, families, and communities, and huge anti-war protests over the last decade illustrated just how dangerous this division can be. Congress passed the War Powers Resolution in 1973 to limit a president's power to initiate or escalate military actions abroad. The Vietnam conflict was never a war, strictly speaking, since Congress never passed a declaration of war. Vietnamese citizens who want Americans out of their country refer to it as the "American War."

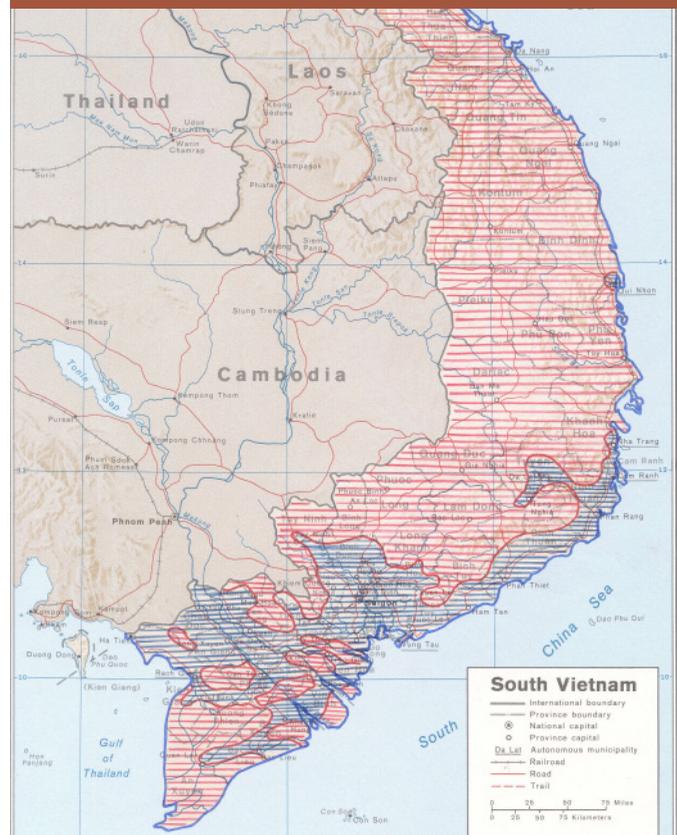


President Ford meets in the Oval Office with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller to discuss the American evacuation of Saigon, April 28, 1975. Image courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

GVN and Communist Territorial Control, January 1973



GVN and Communist Territorial Control, March 31, 1975



Maps are from a report to the President on the Situation in South Vietnam from General Fred C. Weyand, April 5, 1975, folder Vietnam (15), Box 19, NSA. Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

The war drags on. But events over the past several weeks indicate that the North Vietnamese Communists will take over the entire country very soon. At the end of March, Da Nang, the second largest city in South Vietnam, fell in chaos with soldiers and civilians in retreat. People hoping to evacuate hung on to landing gear as planes took flight, and others drowned after being pushed from crowded barges. United States leaders did not anticipate that the South Vietnamese government would collapse so quickly, but everyone agrees that once the Communists are in power, they will punish everyone who worked for the Americans.

On April 3, U.S. President Gerald R. Ford captured the attention of Americans when he announced Operation Babylift, an emergency mission to rescue 2,000 Vietnamese orphans and relocate them to the U.S. for adoption. The orphans would be adopted under a new parole program, since existing immigration laws do not allow for large groups of people to enter the country even if fleeing from a Communist takeover. "This is the least we can do," Ford said, "and we will do much, much more."<sup>1</sup> The first official Operation Babylift flight ended in disaster when the plane crashed and killed 78 children and 35 adults. Undeterred, the President vowed, "Our mission of mercy will continue."<sup>2</sup> He and Mrs. Ford greeted orphans and their caregivers when the second flight arrived at the San Francisco Airport.

The President addressed Congress and a national audience on television on April 10 with a passionate plea for military and humanitarian assistance for South Vietnam. “Tonight is a time for straight talk among friends, about where we stand and where we are going,” he said.<sup>3</sup> The North Vietnamese violated the 1973 peace treaty, and the South Vietnamese are in retreat, not knowing whether they can count on continued American assistance. Ford asked elected leaders for \$722 million in assistance, \$250 million of which would be used for economic and humanitarian aid. He considered the support “a profound moral obligation” to the remaining Americans, plus the tens of thousands of Vietnamese who were employed by the U.S. government and contractors or were allies in some way to the American cause. Some leaders estimate that over 200,000 Vietnamese citizens will be killed by Communists if they are not evacuated.

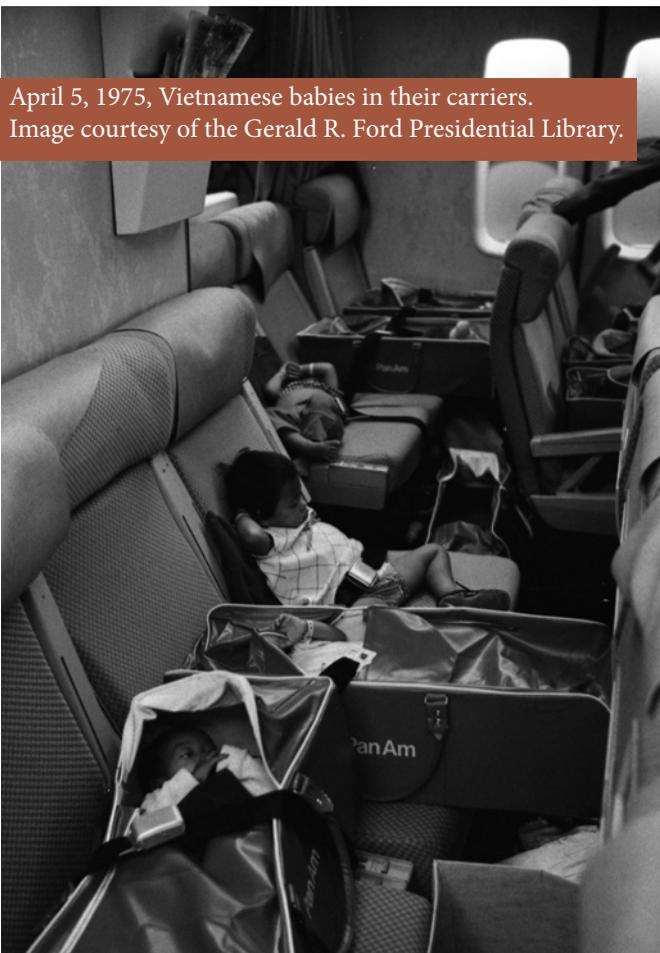
Members of Congress, however, are reluctant to provide military support for evacuating non-Americans, since they fear that will lead our country back into the war. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee met directly with the President, something that has not happened since the committee challenged President Wilson’s leadership at the end of World War One. The committee complained that the evacuation of Americans was proceeding too slowly, but the President assured members that it has the highest priority. “We are holding [the administration’s] feet to the fire,” Senator George McGovern told the *New York Times*.<sup>4</sup>



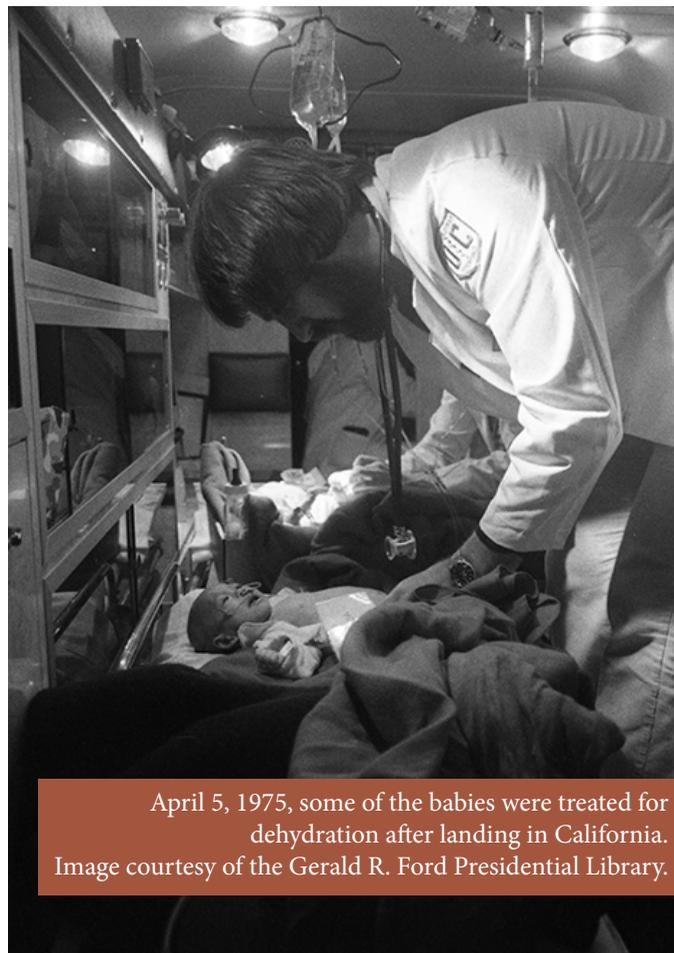
April 3, 1975, at a press conference in California, President Ford announces he is authorizing funds to speed the transfer of Vietnamese orphans to their adoptive U. S. families. Image courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

As elected leaders and officials debate the amount of funding and whether the President has the authority to use the military to evacuate the Vietnamese who are desperate to flee the country, newspapers report that the arrival of refugees is inevitable and imminent. The Justice Department announced on April 22 that since our immigration laws do not provide these refugees with legal status, immigration restrictions for up to 130,000 of them will be waived.<sup>5</sup> Newspapers describe scenes of panic and chaos as refugees are flown from Vietnam to bases in the Philippines and Guam, where they are screened for health and security purposes before being sent to Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, and Eglin Air Base in Florida.<sup>6</sup>

When we learned that the U.S. Embassy in Saigon closed on April 29, we knew that our country's involvement had finally come to an end. The photographs of helicopters rescuing people from the rooftops of buildings, and the stories of the thousands who could not be rescued, left everyone speechless. The South Vietnamese government collapsed the following day.



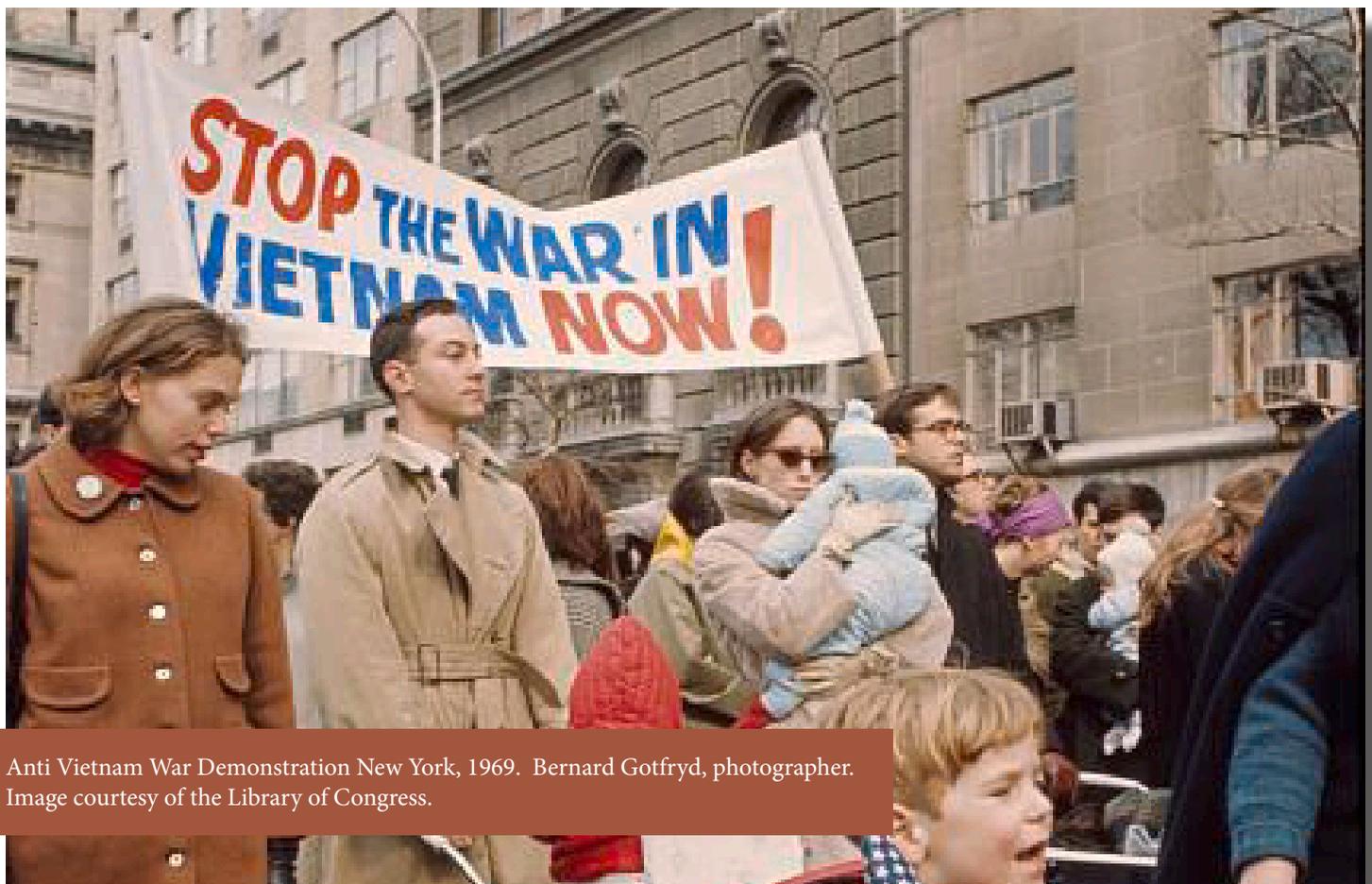
April 5, 1975, Vietnamese babies in their carriers.  
Image courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.



April 5, 1975, some of the babies were treated for dehydration after landing in California.  
Image courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

Americans are divided over what to do about the refugees, as a recent report of public opinion illustrates. Just after the president asked Congress for funding, Gallup polls showed that Americans opposed the resettlement of Vietnamese into this country by a 52-to-36-percent margin. Americans are more closely divided (43 percent in favor; 47 percent opposed) on whether our military should be used to evacuate those Vietnamese who would be the target of punishment or death by Communists because of their affiliation with the U.S. The majority are in favor of appropriating \$250 million in humanitarian aid, but an overwhelming majority (79%) oppose sending military aid. Interestingly, the majority of younger people (age 30 and below) are open to resettlement and military support for rescuing those in danger, while older generations and those who are not in the labor force are more opposed.<sup>7</sup>

Our local communities are divided over the issue as well, and people are talking about the refugee crisis and what we should do. Although there are countless ways to see the issue, the concerns of people who are most vocal seem to fall into three perspectives. Some people believe we have a responsibility to help refugees rebuild their lives in our country and are ready to welcome them with open arms. Some people are concerned that we have our own problems as a country and believe that our responsibility is to ourselves alone. And others believe this is yet another example of the federal government's mismanagement of the situation in Vietnam and that taxpayers deserve the right to be involved in decisions like this that will affect their communities.



Anti Vietnam War Demonstration New York, 1969. Bernard Gotfryd, photographer. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

After you read about each of these options, you will see a brief list of actions that might be taken along with tradeoffs that must be considered as well. After deliberating about each option with others, what do you think we should do?

OPTION

1

Welcome and Support Refugees

OPTION

2

Focus on Our Own Problems

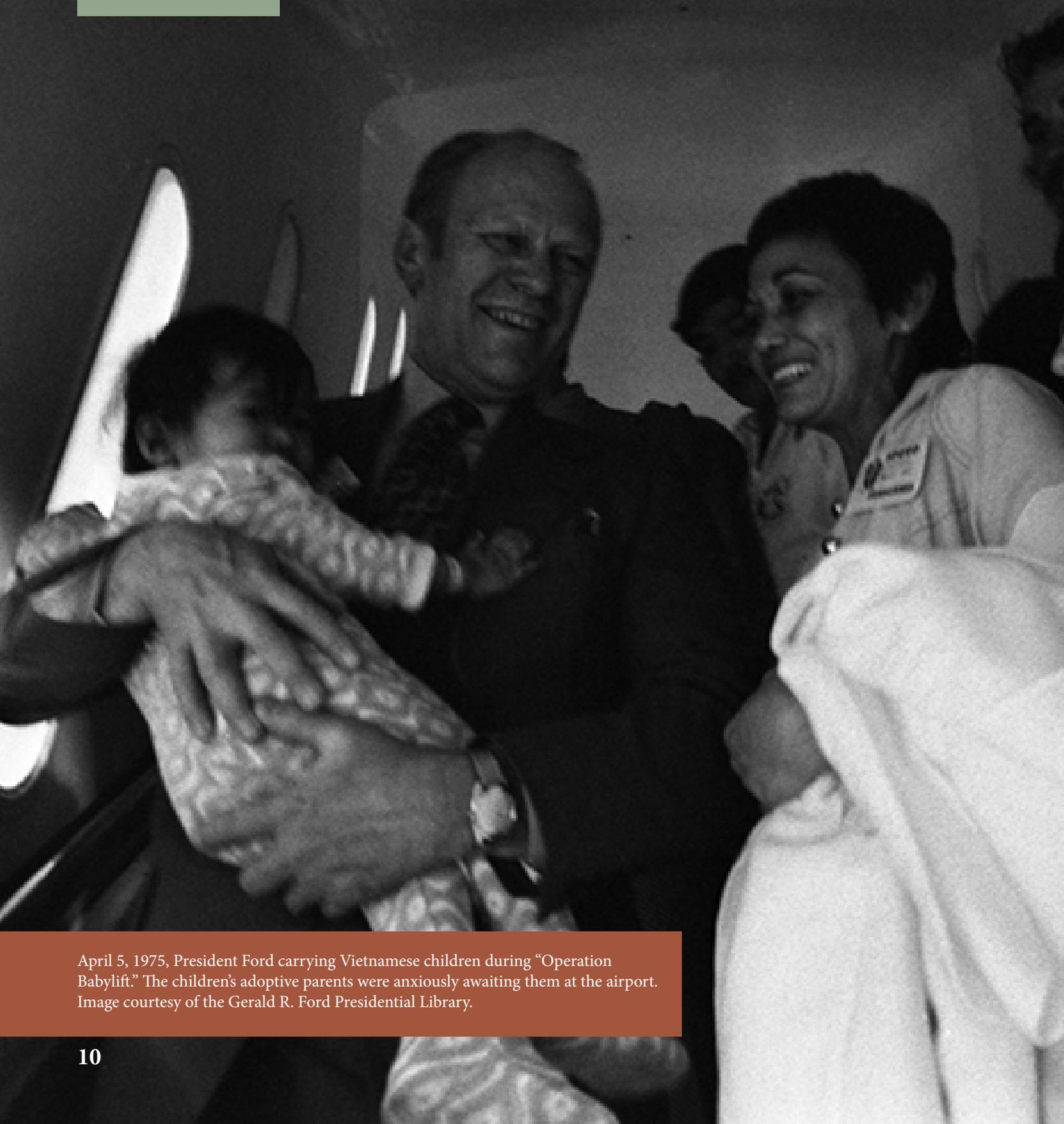
OPTION

3

Hold the Federal Government  
Accountable for its Mistakes

OPTION  
1

# WELCOME AND SUPPORT REFUGEES



April 5, 1975, President Ford carrying Vietnamese children during “Operation Babylift.” The children’s adoptive parents were anxiously awaiting them at the airport. Image courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

*The United States government and its people have a moral responsibility to accept and support those who assisted us in the war, as well as those who are likely to be killed by the North Vietnamese government. This is who we are as Americans: we keep our commitment to allies and provide freedom and humanitarian assistance for those who are oppressed. Our country should be known as one where Vietnamese refugees in need find assistance and have the same opportunity we have had as Americans.*

**“Unlike the ordeals in Vietnam that Americans witnessed so helplessly in the years of war, the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees is a problem that ordinary people of the United States have the power to solve.”**

~Editorial, May 2, 1975, *The New York Times*

Many Americans agree with President Ford that the United States’ international reputation is at stake in this crisis. “The [free nations of Asia] must not think for a minute that the United States is pulling out on them or intends to abandon them to aggression,” he said in a speech to Congress. “We will stand by our friends, we will honor our commitments, and we will uphold our country’s principles.”<sup>8</sup> In response to Ford’s speech, one serviceman wrote to the New York Times and urged elected leaders not to “allow our American nation to lose the worldwide respect all of us have worked so hard to retain. . . Let us act now so that every American, now and in the future, can be proud to be a part of this nation regardless of the cost.”<sup>9</sup>

## Letters to the Editor

### The U.S. and South Vietnam: After President Ford’s Address

**To the Editor:**  
As our domestic economic crisis moves to the forefront of national concern, America seems to have abandoned many of its most crucial moral obligations. The recent collapse of South Vietnamese military forces points up forcefully the results of such an abandonment.

The United States stood beside the Republic of South Vietnam for fifteen years at a great cost in lives, money and prestige. The fact that some Americans from all walks of life, including many professional military men, regarded this endeavor as ill-fated from the start is not, however, the question facing the leadership of the United States today.

We have created a situation which no longer allows the honorable hand-washing which Congress is scrambling for. The United States, through Mr. Kissinger and ex-President Nixon, explicitly guaranteed the security of the Republic of South Vietnam at the Paris peace talks and through private correspondence with South Vietnamese

and protect its citizens and friends. It cannot evade its responsibility, so it should convene, vote and take the praise or blame—now. If Congress fiddles while babies die by the thousands, it should be known and remembered as the Nero Congress.

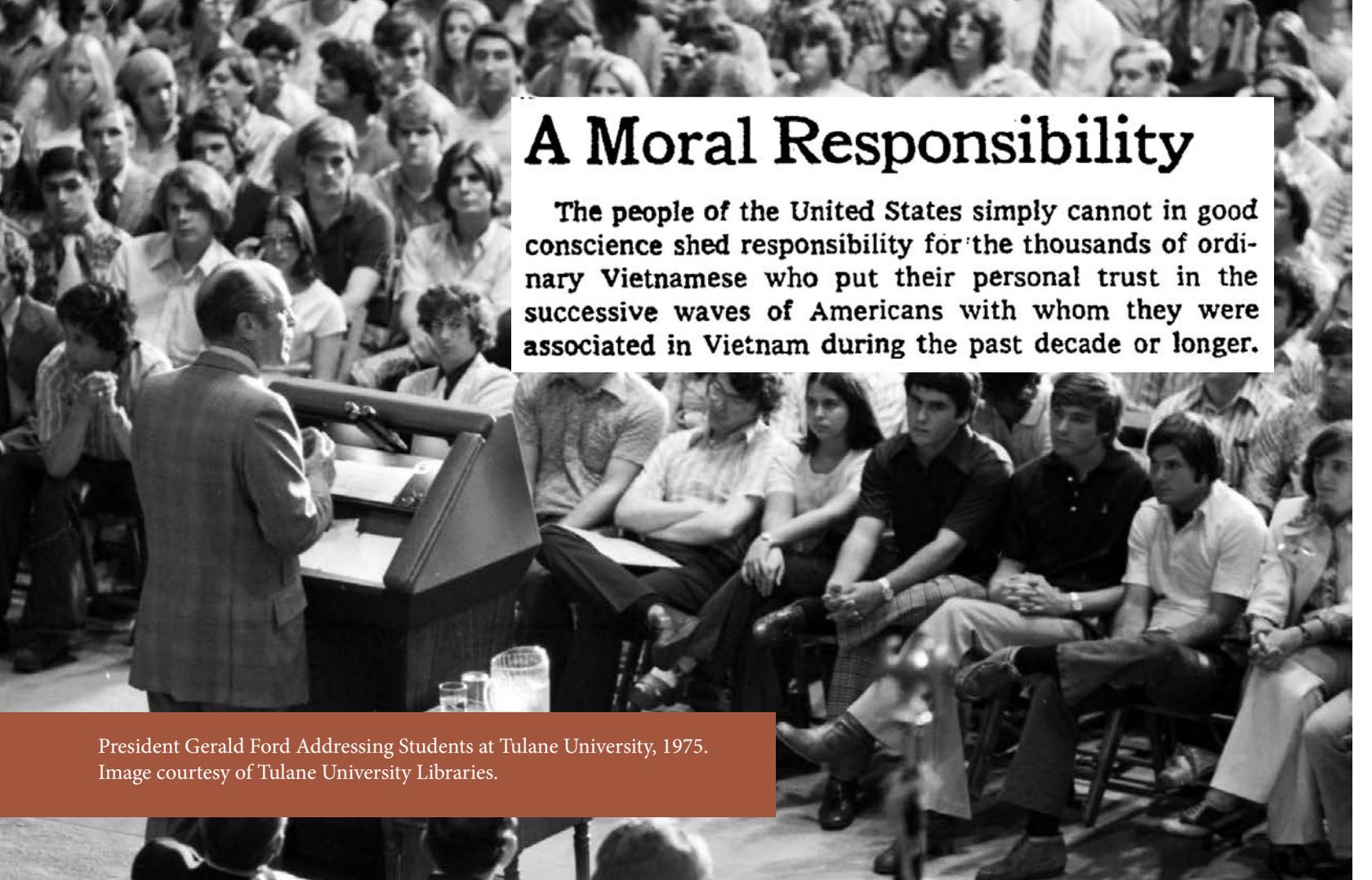
MARGARET W. PATTERSON  
New York, April 10, 1975

**To the Editor:**  
When I hear solemn discussions by eminent public figures on whether America’s “word” will ever be good again if we do not give limitless support to South Vietnam, I seem to be transported into the beautiful, clear world of Victorian melodrama. There a girl who committed a single “fault” was tarnished for life; the shadow of a smirch on a gentleman’s reputation meant a lifetime of atonement.

Is the community of nations composed of rigid moralists, none of whom would hesitate to spend \$150 billion to help a distant minor ally? Have the Governments of England and France, Germany and Japan, Russia and India, and so forth and so on, never fudged a little bit on their word when circumstances required it? Before what moral tribunal is the United States going to be dragged if, in this particular instance, it ceases to follow rigid

Claude Bellere  
Chairman of the  
The French

April 16, 1975, *The New York Times*. Newspapers around the country received letters expressing concerns related to the crisis.

A black and white photograph of President Gerald Ford speaking to a large group of students at Tulane University in 1975. He is standing at a podium on the left, facing the audience. The students are seated in rows, listening attentively. The background is filled with more students, creating a sense of a large gathering.

## A Moral Responsibility

The people of the United States simply cannot in good conscience shed responsibility for the thousands of ordinary Vietnamese who put their personal trust in the successive waves of Americans with whom they were associated in Vietnam during the past decade or longer.

President Gerald Ford Addressing Students at Tulane University, 1975.  
Image courtesy of Tulane University Libraries.

We are reminded by those who support welcoming and supporting refugees that we successfully allowed over half a million Cuban refugees to assimilate into our country after Cuba's Communist revolution, in 1959. Our volunteer agencies have a successful track record of resettling displaced persons, and they are eager to help the evacuees start a new life in the U.S. We are all eager to let our involvement in Vietnam become a thing of the past, of course, but as a *New York Times* editorial recently argued, "bitterness over a policy that failed need not be compounded by an unworthy failure of conscience toward those who suffered the most."<sup>10</sup> In this view, to fail the refugees is to fail ourselves.

It's hard to turn our backs on the Vietnamese people when we hear stories from those with firsthand experience. Retired Major General Edward Lansdale speaks about the character of the Vietnamese people he came to know through his service in their country. Americans now have an opportunity to illustrate the character of our country, he says. "As you read or listen to the news of Vietnam, remember the distraught Americans among us who are trying to save their wives' families . . . American states and communities should be now determining how many of these worthy Vietnamese can be settled among them. They are a splendid citizenry who would make fine neighbors. Let us be humanitarians, truly."<sup>11</sup>

Many communities are already greeting the refugees as new neighbors. A small Oregon town of 2,500 people took in 148 orphans and refugees; one retired Army colonel arranged care for 30 orphans with disabilities in his home. Nuns and other volunteers set up a shelter in the town's Oktoberfest beer hall.<sup>12</sup>

Over 100 undocumented evacuees landed at Oakland Airport on a plane with 294 passengers and 252 seats. "They arrived here naked, without documents," an immigration officer reported. "Nobody knows how they got here." A local church opened its doors with families living in Sunday School classrooms and others in a common room that was quickly made into a dormitory. In Arkansas, several hundred people welcomed refugees at the airport with applause, as the high school band played the "Star Spangled Banner," helping to drown out the one lone protestor who shouted racial slurs and held a racist sign.<sup>13</sup>



A flight nurse with a Vietnamese orphan baby, debarks a C-141 aircraft with the help of Air Force personnel during Operation Babylift. Clark AFB, Philippines, April 1975. Image courtesy of the National Archives Association.

Welcoming and supporting Vietnamese refugees is the least we can do for those whose lives are in real danger of punishment or death because of their relationship with us. No other country has stepped forward to assist in a way that we can assist, and it is our responsibility. The following actions illustrate things we can and should do immediately. Yes, there are drawbacks and consequences to consider, but our responsibility as a nation and community and the values we hold dear as Americans require us to act now.

## ACTIONS

Prepare emergency housing for refugees and make room for children in our daycare centers and schools.

Generate local support for nonprofit organizations, churches, and agencies to sponsor refugees.

Urge Congress to appropriate funds for refugee settlement.

## DRAWBACKS

We have no assurance that the federal government will cover the immediate or long-term costs.

Refugees may find some of our community members hostile in response.

The urgent needs of Americans should be our first priority.

OPTION  
2

FOCUS ON OUR OWN  
PROBLEMS



Richard Nixon boarding Army One upon his departure from the White House after resigning the office of President of the United States following the Watergate Scandal in 1974. Image courtesy of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library.

**“I don’t see why we should sacrifice our jobs and bring in more people. We are not obligated to police the world.”**

**~“Wide Hostility Found as First Exiles Arrive,”  
May 2, 1975, *The New York Times***

*The Vietnam War has cost us too much already, and we have some real problems that badly need to be addressed in our own country and in our own communities. The job market in the United States is in decline and some of our neighbors are struggling to make ends meet. It is time for our country to heal from the past and invest in ourselves, not people from another country. We have been divided over this conflict for too long. We have no responsibility in this situation beyond getting our own citizens out of Vietnam.*

In President Ford’s speech to Congress and the American people, he asked, “Who can forget the enormous sacrifices of blood, dedication and treasure that we made in Vietnam?” He reminded us that 5 presidents and 12 Congresses have been engaged with Indochina, that over \$150 billion have been spent, and that “millions of Americans served, thousands died,

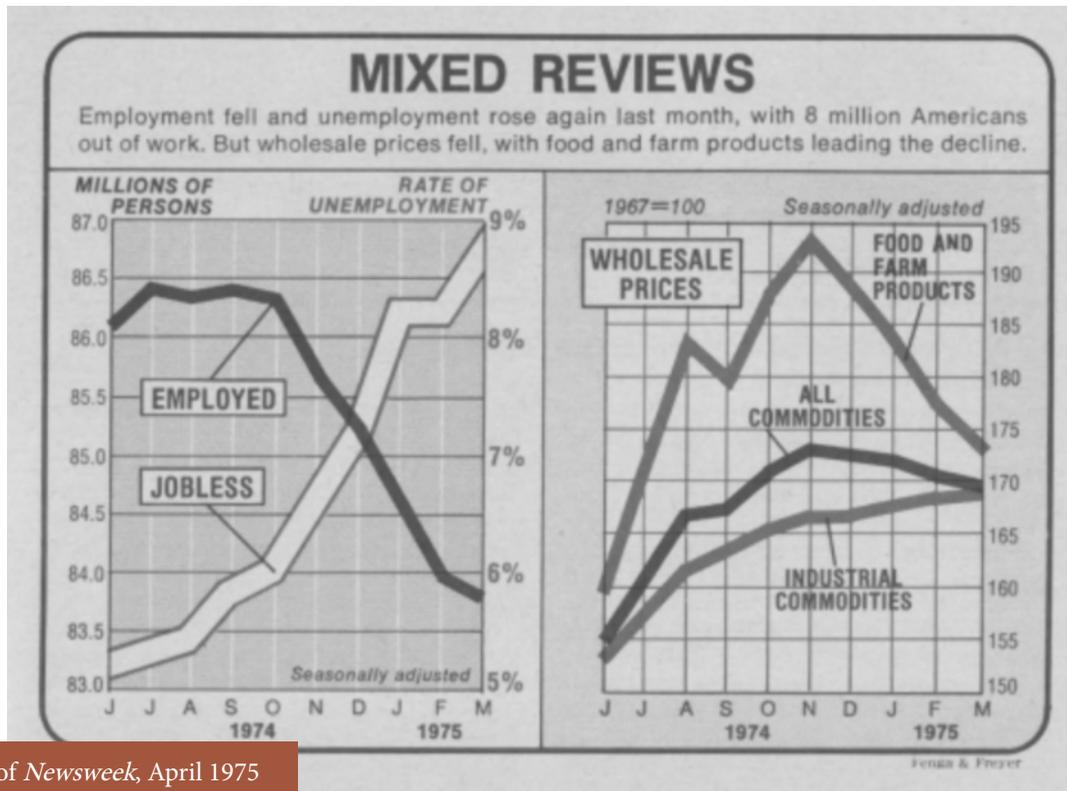
and many more were wounded, imprisoned, or lost.” The American people have not forgotten the cost and, in this view, we have paid more than enough for a war that should never have been fought or should have been fought successfully. We are reminded of our sacrifices every time we see a wounded soldier or help loved ones heal from trauma caused by the war.<sup>14</sup>

### **U.S., JOBLESS RATE UP TO 9.2% IN MAY, HIGHEST SINCE '41**

Some people think Operation Babylift is a public relations campaign designed to pull the emotional heart strings of Americans. Even anti-war activists admit that our motives are misguided. “The idea that it’s to save children’s lives angers me,” says George Webber, the head of New York Theological Seminary. “It’s the desire of families in this country who want children badly that has led to the airlift—not the likely death of the children, because that’s unlikely.” And, according to a Yale University psychologist, “These children are being used as pawns for a variety of reasons, but I don’t think we really care about them.”<sup>15</sup>



“Statue of Liberty Holds a Stoplight”, Etta Hulme, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*



Graph courtesy of *Newsweek*, April 1975

As one recent letter writer to *The New York Times* put it, “Large sums of money can be raised by relief organizations within a period of several days, but the children in our own ghettos and in the Appalachians throughout our own country have been denied and still do not have their basic needs met. If we care so much about the welfare of children, why do we ignore the plight of children from urban minority groups and in rural areas of our own country? It is time to reorder our priorities, for our own children are in need.”<sup>16</sup> Reordering our priorities means a clean break from Vietnam, and that reordering is long overdue.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics recently reported that we are facing the highest unemployment rate—8.7 percent—we have seen in years. The total number of jobs available in New York City is at the lowest level in the 25 years that data has been available. Every available job is important to the American people.<sup>17</sup> “People are losing their cars, houses, jobs,” a 35-year-old Black

auto worker in Detroit told a reporter. “Let them [Vietnamese] stay there until we do something for people here.” A 27-year-old man studying data processing said, “I don’t see why we should sacrifice our jobs and bring in more people. We are not obligated to police the world.”<sup>18</sup>

Many Americans have been writing to their elected leaders about the issue. Senator Tunney of California, a Democrat, has received more than 5,000 angry letters, and over 90% are against the resettlement of Vietnamese immigrants in this country. Senator Schweiker of Pennsylvania, a Republican, has received approximately 3,000 such letters. “The primary concern is losing jobs,” one legislative aide told a reporter. Democratic senator McGovern of South Dakota has taken a lot of heat for his view that resettlement is not in the best interests of the evacuees, but the overwhelming majority of letters to his office agree with him.<sup>19</sup>

Although the concerns of many Americans may sound callous, many believe the needs of our own people must come first. In Seattle, for example, the city council voted, seven to two, against a resolution that would have welcomed Vietnamese refugees. And in Niceville, Florida, local residents circulated a petition to keep refugees from settling permanently in their town.<sup>20</sup> Some Americans might be motivated by racism and a fear of people from Indochina, but most people are simply concerned about their own economic security. Our security matters, too.

The following actions represent some things we can do to show that our problems and those of our fellow Americans should come first. The drawbacks should be considered fairly, of course, but if our greatest concern is our own security and our own well being, we need to act accordingly.



Cartoon courtesy of Ranan Lurie,  
*Newsweek*, April 14, 1975

## ACTIONS

Protest and demand that the large-scale evacuation and resettlement of Vietnamese refugees end immediately.

Urge our members of Congress to vote “no” on funds related to refugee assistance.

Work with your own city or village councils to pass legislation that makes it clear that these refugees would not be welcome in your community.

## DRAWBACKS

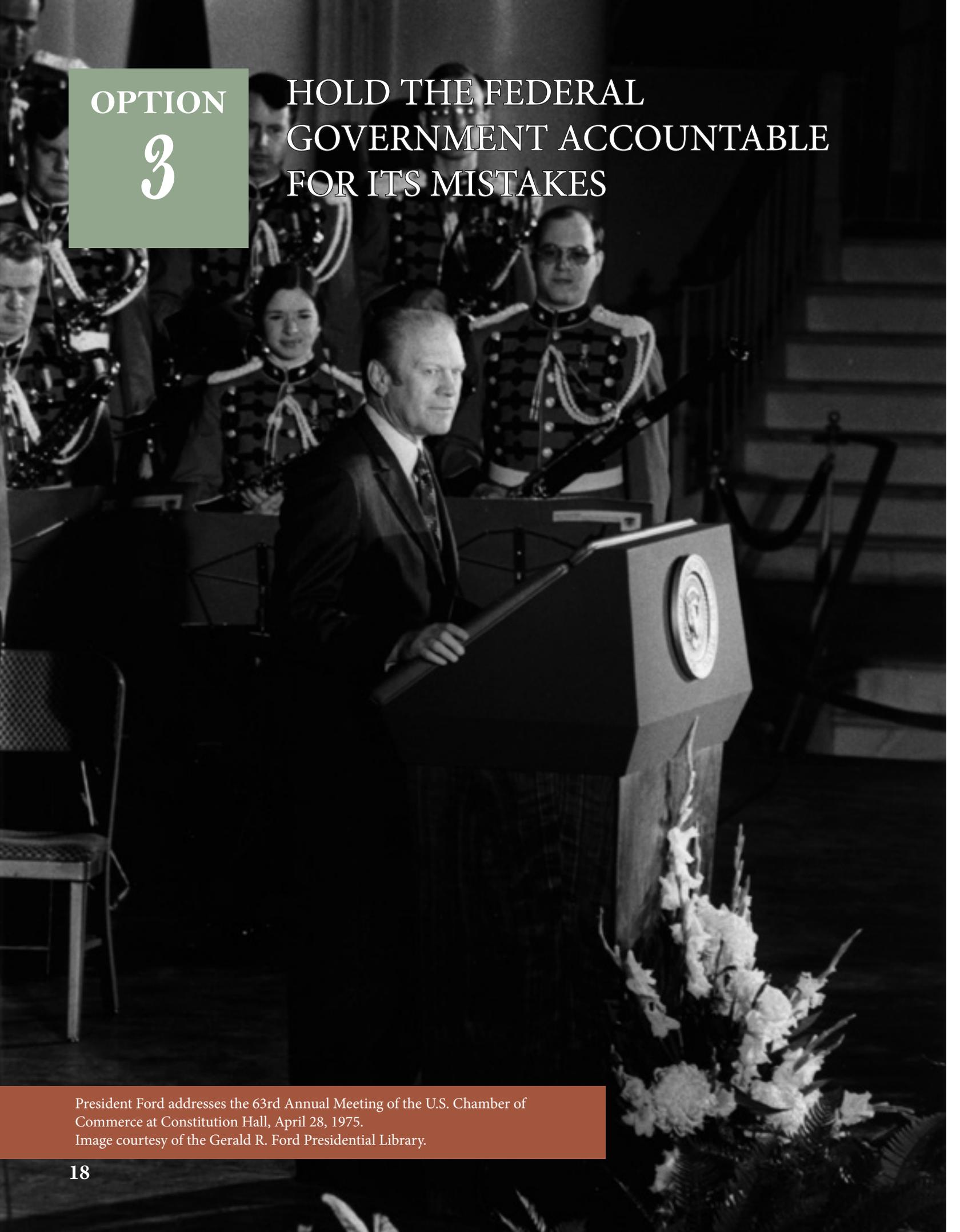
Those Vietnamese who have helped us might die at the hands of communist leaders.

Our allies will view us as disloyal and untrustworthy.

We are a nation of immigrants, and our country has always been a land of promise and freedom.

OPTION  
3

HOLD THE FEDERAL  
GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE  
FOR ITS MISTAKES



President Ford addresses the 63rd Annual Meeting of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce at Constitution Hall, April 28, 1975.  
Image courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

“The problem really has little, if anything, to do with the refugees at all. They were merely the unfortunate catalyst which brought to light the basic realization that the ideal of government ‘of the people, by the people, and for the people’ has been buried beneath the bureaucratic morass known as Uncle Sam.”

~“Just What Is Unamerican?” *Playground Daily News*  
(Fort Walton Beach, Florida), May 20, 1970

*This crisis is the result of the unchecked power of the federal government. Local communities have not been consulted regarding the refugee situation, and the chaos and uncertainty we are experiencing is a reminder that citizens— not the federal government— must be free to decide what happens in their own communities. We cannot trust bureaucrats in the government to make decisions that affect our lives. Citizens must get involved in the decision-making process and hold the government accountable for its recklessness in this situation.*

When President Gerald Ford took the oath of office following the Watergate scandal and the resignation of President Richard Nixon, he inherited the challenges of rising inflation, fears of energy shortages, and the conflict in Southeast Asia. “Our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works,” he said.<sup>21</sup> But restoring trust in government is easier said than done. The chaos we are witnessing with the evacuation of Vietnamese citizens from their country into ours is just more of the same incompetence.

In his State of the Union speech, the president complained that there are too many legislative restrictions on presidential power in foreign affairs but in this view, there are not enough such restrictions. Until we rein in the power of the federal government, our nightmares will continue.

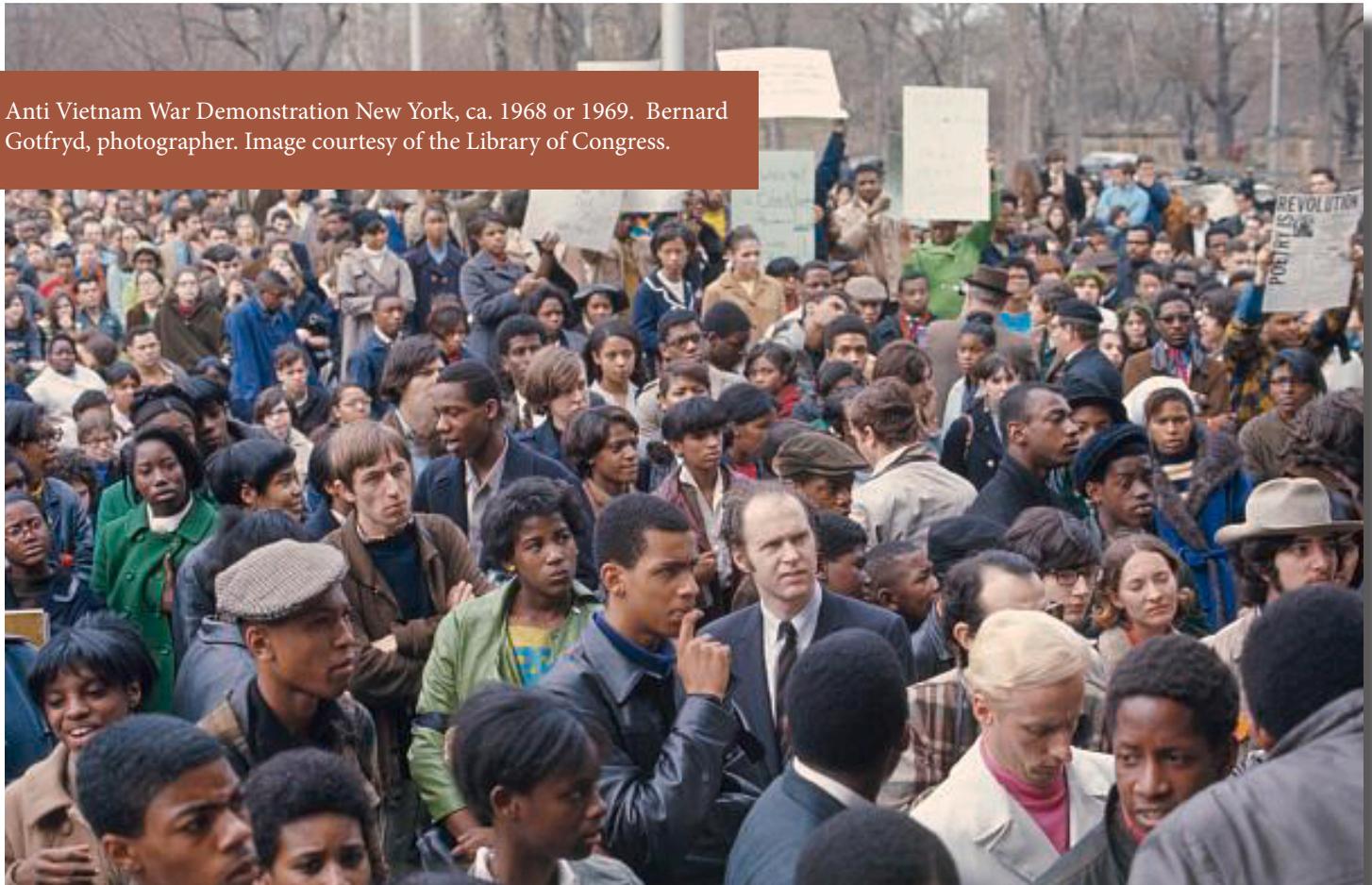


Photograph of President Gerald R. Ford delivering the State of the Union Address, January 12, 1977. Image courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum.

We have no power to stop the government from delivering refugees to our country, but we must hold the government accountable for all of the promises they make. For example, Ambassador Dean Brown, who heads the President's Refugee Task Force, said that "no American city will be inundated by Vietnamese refugees."<sup>22</sup> Major General David Ott, who is in command at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, promises that no refugee can leave the base until a proper home has been found for them.<sup>23</sup> We are told by other government officials that refugees undergo health screenings and that admitted criminals will not receive the same freedom as others.<sup>24</sup> We need assurance that these promises and others are kept.

Some people complain that questioning the decision to bring refugees into our country is an offense to our values and thus un-American. But as one citizen in Florida writes, "must one then assume that it was Christian-like and that it was the 'American way' to mass-bomb Hanoi, to defoliate the whole of South Vietnam, to massacre women and children, to violate and invade other countries without declaring war? Were we showing our true side then—or now?"<sup>25</sup> Many Americans stood silently by while our government committed these atrocities so, in this view, the current lectures on morality mean very little.

Anti Vietnam War Demonstration New York, ca. 1968 or 1969. Bernard Gotfryd, photographer. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.



This crisis is a symptom of the real problem—a failed foreign policy that needs revision. Our country should never have been in Vietnam in the first place, and we need leaders who will keep us out of the affairs of other nations. We cannot demand that other countries provide the kinds of freedom to their citizens that we enjoy, and we cannot build or rebuild nations in our image.

Career politicians lack the courage to make hard decisions, and it's time we elect leaders who will represent hard-working Americans instead of seeking power for themselves. One fed-up resident of a community near an Air Force base where refugees are being housed said it best:

The time is now for the taxpayers to get involved in the decision-making process. Stop letting the other guy make your decisions. Decision time for all of us is at hand—start communicating with your elected representative and if you are satisfied with his decisions—make your decision at the polls.”<sup>26</sup>

We need to put the “We” back in “We the People.” Otherwise our country will be unrecognizable to our children and grandchildren. The actions below are certainly worthy of consideration. The drawbacks should be discussed as well, but in the end we have to determine what we value the most.

#### ACTIONS

Campaign for and elect leaders who will keep us out of the affairs of other countries.

Hold the government to its promise of indefinitely detaining those refugees who do not have sponsors.

Enforce existing immigration quotas and strict qualifications for those refugees we accept.

#### DRAWBACKS

We are part of a global community, and the affairs of other countries affect us and matter.

The situation is changing quickly, and flexibility from everyone—at federal, state, and local levels—is required to save human lives.

We have successfully made allowances in the past, and these refugees will become contributing members of our society as well.



**STOP**

**Do not read the following section until you have  
completed your deliberation.**

## EPILOGUE

The month of May 1975 unfolded with President Ford and the administration seeking public and Congressional approval for the evacuation that would require additional funding and parole status for tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees. Congress passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 and Ford signed the bill into law on May 24. Congress appropriated \$405 million for refugee settlement, above and beyond the \$98 million that was spent during the evacuation. In addition to Camp Pendleton, Fort Chaffee, and Eglin Air Force Base, Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania began receiving refugees at the end of May. By the end of December, approximately 130,000 refugees had been resettled in the United States, and the last reception center closed on December 20.<sup>27</sup>

The U.S. government worked with nonprofit organizations and churches to match refugees with sponsors, those individuals and organizations who would be responsible for the refugees' well-being until they could support themselves through employment. The government provided oversight to ensure that refugees were dispersed throughout the country, and by December, the majority were located in California (27,199), followed by Texas (9,130), Pennsylvania (7,159), Florida (5,332), and Washington, D.C. (4,182). Illinois, Louisiana, Minnesota, New York, Oklahoma and Virginia became home to between 3,000 and 4,000, and 18 additional states became home to fewer than 1,000 each.

One local newspaper near a reception center advertised jobs that included sponsorship opportunities:

- *Two fishermen needed for job in Florida. Position pays \$2.10 per hour with sponsorship.*
- *Two or three mechanics, one of whom should speak some English. The sponsor is a Datsun car dealer in Georgia.*
- *Workers for greenhouses in Maryland and North Carolina....*<sup>28</sup>



A Vietnamese girl, one of 2,000 refugees brought out of Vietnam by Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 463 (HMH-463), clutches her teddy bear while being processed aboard the attack aircraft carrier USS Hancock (CVA-19) during evacuation exercises of Operation Frequent Wind. Image courtesy of the National Archives Association.

The 130,000 refugees processed into American society between April and December 1975 became the first of three waves of refugees from East Asia during the decade. These first-wave immigrants were primarily well-educated, spoke English, and were skilled workers, technicians, and professionals. Second-wave immigrants (1975-77), also known as Boat People, came to the U.S. in opposition to the new government's policies and oftentimes victims of rural resettlement programs. The third wave of refugees from Vietnam, beginning in 1978, included ethnic Chinese, and by March 1980, 350,000 Vietnamese, as well as refugees from Laos and Cambodia, were in the United States.<sup>29</sup>

The United States did not have a comprehensive policy guiding the entry of refugees into the country, and between 1975 and 1979, the U.S. attorney general issued ten separate authorizations allowing Vietnamese to exist as parolees. Priority was given to dependents of American citizens, followed by employees of the government or private businesses. In 1980, the Refugee Act gave the refugees resident-alien status.<sup>30</sup>



Photograph of President Gerald Ford Meeting with Brent Scowcroft, Graham Martin, General Frederick Weyand, and Henry Kissinger in the Oval Office to Discuss the Situation in Vietnam  
Image courtesy of the National Archives Association.



President Ford posing on the staircase from the top of the building that served as the American Embassy in Saigon, Vietnam, from the 1960s to 1975. Images courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum.

On April 10, 1999, the 24th anniversary of President Ford's address to Congress and the American people regarding the refugee crisis, the Gerald R. Ford Museum in Grand Rapids opened a new exhibit showing the last days of the Vietnam War. The exhibit's centerpiece was the staircase of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. President Ford spoke and reflected on April 1975 and the difficult decisions he had to make.

*I pray that no future American president is ever faced with the grim options that confronted me as the military situation on the ground deteriorated ... mediating between those who wanted an early exit and others who would go down with all flags flying ... running a desperate race against the clock to rescue as many people as we could before enemy shelling destroyed airport runways ... followed by the heartbreaking realization that, as refugees streamed out onto those runways, we were left with only one alternative - a final evacuation by helicopter from the roof of the U.S. Embassy.*

Ford grieved over the Vietnamese who could not be rescued, as well as some 2,500 U.S. military forces still unaccounted for. "We did the best we could," he said. "History will judge whether we could have done better."<sup>32</sup>

The resettlement of Vietnamese refugees is remembered in a number of ways across the United States. In Michigan, for example, a traveling exhibit in 2009 titled “Their Journey: Vietnamese in Michigan,” illustrated author Bich Minh Nguyen’s memoir, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* and her childhood journey from Vietnam to Grand Rapids in 1975. The West Michigan Vietnamese History Project of the Grand Rapids Public Library collects the history of those who contributed to and were affected by the Refugee Resettlement Program, founded by Rev. Howard Schipper during the hectic months following the fall of Saigon. The documentary *Newcomer Legacy: A Vietnamese-American Story in West Michigan* features the stories of nine Vietnamese refugees. The Vietnamese American Community of West Michigan is an active non-profit organization that provides opportunities for collaboration and support for the community and keeps their unique history alive for the next generation. Black April is an annual event held on April 30, a somber time for the Vietnamese community to mourn the loss of their country and family members.<sup>31</sup>



2016 Black April Commemoration. The statue behind the women is of a U. S. soldier and a South Vietnamese soldier demonstrating their “brotherhood” in the conflict.

Images courtesy of the Vietnamese American Community of West Michigan.



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President Gerald R. Ford, First Lady Betty Ford, Dr. Mark Oscherwitz, and nurses on an evacuation bus at San Francisco International Airport during the arrival of an Operation Babylift plane from South Vietnam, April 5, 1975.  
Image courtesy of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

