

"... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations." — Abraham Lincoln

The Indo-Chinese Refugee Program—A View from a Camp

ALAN CARTER

There was more than just passing irony in my assignment as Senior Civilian Coordinator at the Indo-Chinese Resettlement Center at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania. Several weeks before, I had left Saigon on one of the last helicopters, anguished and angered over the failure of the Embassy to extricate the majority of the Vietnamese who worked for us. Now, suddenly, there was an opportunity to participate in the last act of that tragedy, an opportunity to help in the resettlement of over 130,000 Vietnamese who had succeeded in fleeing to the United States. There was, in other words, an opportunity to help end this piece of history on an affirmative note.

It turned out to be the most rewarding and difficult assignment of my career in government. Difficult because none of us who worked for the President's Inter-Agency Task Force, directed by Julia Taft, had

any training or preparation for what was involved. Certainly those of us who directed the resettlement camps had never before faced the range of problems in public administration involved; and none of us, at the outset at least, knew whether it would be possible to close the camps within the seven months that had been established as the deadline.

The assignment had characteristics rare in government. There were two clear-cut objectives and there was a definable time-frame built into them. First we were charged with running the camps, with making them as decent and comfortable as possible for the Indo-Chinese; and secondly, we were to assist in resettlement. But we were on self-destruct; the bureaucratic mechanisms we had to establish were to end within a foreseeable period of time.

On the civilian side, we were asked to coordinate and direct the refugee-related activities and personnel assigned to our staff from a number of federal agencies, including HEW, the Department of Labor, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Center for Disease Control, State, AID, USIA, the Social Security Administration, and others. We had to coordinate with the local community, the Office of the Governor of

the State of Pennsylvania, its Child Welfare Bureau, the Social Services Bureau. We had to work with the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the YMCA and other private groups. We related directly to the work of the various Voluntary Agencies who had the specific responsibility for refugee resettlement—the Lutheran Immigration Service, Church World Services, the International Rescue Committee, the Catholic Conference and others.

The other side of the staffing coin was the United States military establishment, which served as the support and logistics arms of the operation. The specific responsibilities of the military included housing, messing, security, medical and clothing services to the refugees. But had they held strictly to the terms of their tasks, it would not have been possible to operate Fort Indiantown Gap as well as I like to think we did.

For it was the military that took up the slack that was created by the single important failing of the federal civilian bureaucracy. Even with the intercession of the Office of Management and Budget, it was difficult to get the civilian agencies to staff the Inter-Agency Task Force on other than an intermittent basis. On the day of my arrival at Indiantown Gap, I attended a

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farewell party for a considerable number of key personnel and, at that point, the camp had been open only five and one-half weeks. People were assigned to us for 30 days and sometimes 60 days. The caliber of the people varied; that was to be expected. But to hold together an operation as diverse as ours required something more than a revolving door approach to personnel. The problem was compounded by the fact that replacements frequently did not arrive for days and sometimes weeks after the vacancy developed. I am still struck by the inability of the federal establishment, large as it is, to staff a temporary operation with good people for the duration. If nothing else, the egos of a significant number of bureaucrats must have been swollen when they learned how incredibly indispensable they were to the ongoing functions of agencies that numbered their staffs in the thousands.

I would not myself be comfortable operating within the military bureaucracy; but I became envious of the command it exercises. Its officers and men were usually assigned for the duration, even at great personal and professional sacrifice.

It was the military that filled the cracks we developed on the civilian side, responded to every request which took them beyond those tasks assigned them and did it with a sense of commitment and willingness that was altogether remarkable.

So, for that matter, was the sense of commitment of the civilian force, something I will elaborate on later.

Indiantown Gap, of all the camps, had a slight edge in experience, since we were the last to open. The military unit that actually opened the camp had gone through the wringer at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas. Some ten days before the arrival of the first refugees at the Gap, the 46th Support Group, which normally headquarters at Fort Bragg, was shifted from Chaffee to Indiantown Gap and went into that incredible 24-hour-a-day demobbing operation to get things ready. The first cadre of civilians arrived at the same time as the 46th and when, on May 28, the first refugees arrived, basic facilities were in place.

By the end of June, we reached our peak population, almost 17,000 Indo-Chinese. From that point on, we were, in essence, running a city. But a city whose inhabitants were all laboring under various degrees of trauma and fear, a people with a tragic past and an uncertain future. Both past and present weighed heavily on them and entered into all of our deliberations and plans for helping them cope.

There was, throughout, a somewhat unreal air about the camp; walking into the area set aside for the refugees, one saw mostly smiles. But they were the smiles of Asians, meant as much as anything else to shield from public view the inner feelings of pain, homesickness and uncertainty that, as time went along, we found to be endemic.

There were, of course, the counterbalances provided by the extraordinary Indo-Chinese resiliency and resourcefulness. It is impossible to envisage any other aggregate of 17,000 people in that camp which could conduct itself with the pride, self-discipline and (at least outward) calm that were so noticeable. One statistic will suffice as an example; during the entire operation of Indiantown Gap there were only four cases, two of theft and two of assault, that were serious enough to bring into the court system of Pennsylvania. That is four cases in six months amongst the 22,000 people who went through the camp.

Their fear and concern and our problem of dealing with a sudden influx of the refugees all relate directly to how the camps were run.

There was, for example, a white plastic tape that ran around the entire perimeter of the area of the camp which housed the refugees. It was there as an extension of the legal fiction which, in effect, made that area extra-territorial. Not until a refugee was matched with a sponsor could he leave that area since, according to the fiction, he had not yet fulfilled the requirements of immigration and therefore was not legally in the United States. To cross the tape would constitute a violation of the law; and therefore, all of his activities took place behind that tape—his living quarters were there, his mess halls, schools and recreation areas.

But that tape served still another

function, perhaps as important as the legal. It enabled us to provide some sense of privacy by limiting the number of Americans who had access to that area. Media and the inevitable VIPs were allowed in; and, of course, camp officials, but few others. We were determined that the Indo-Chinese were not to be on display; not to be gawked at; and given as much privacy as the facilities would permit.

Privacy, however, was a relatively scarce commodity from the moment a refugee came to the camp. He was, in the first instance, issued an identity card, assigned to his barracks, given sheets and blankets and then moved into the barracks with up to 90 others. The one thing we could provide was a plywood partition for each family unit. But, symbolically, that was the maximum privacy we could afford the refugees.

They were, inevitably, subject to lines at the mess hall, interviews by US officials, discussions with case workers for the Voluntary Agencies, medical examinations and all of the other essential mechanisms of a refugee program—almost all of which impinged on what we normally regard as privacy and all of which were essential.

But along with what we required of the refugees one must note what we offered him in his transition from one society to another.

That transition has special problems unlike those confronted by other large immigrant groups to the United States, problems which will continue to compound the efforts of the refugees to integrate into our culture.

First was the fact that the Indo-Chinese refugees found no large existing ethnic base to which they could attach themselves; and secondly, the program had built into it the inherent necessity of dispersal. There was no way in which the Indo-Chinese could automatically congregate in large communities. That process of congregation has, in the past, served immigrant groups well, permitting a more gradual and less jarring transition.

Thus, our "acculturation" efforts had to address themselves to what we called "survival skills" at the most basic levels. Our adult education courses focused largely on such things as shopping at

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supermarkets, American coinage, how to get a driver's license, American foods, the role of Voluntary Agencies, the legal structure of the United States, vocational orientation (as opposed to vocational training), geography—all designed to give the refugees at least a few cultural footholds into this strange, complex and bewildering culture of ours.

The fact that the refugee population in the camp was so transient in nature (the average refugee would spend six to nine weeks at the camp) made comprehensive training and education impossible.

And so when we established a school system for youngsters six to 16, in conformance with Pennsylvania state law, the curriculum had only three main goals. The first was to teach (the beginnings of) English as a second language, the second was orientation to American school systems, and the third was testing

of skills so that we could send along with each student a transcript, thus enabling his school district to place him in the appropriate grade more easily.

We used the camp bulletin to reinforce the skills and knowledge we were emphasizing; we had a special intensive program (only three hours long) which reached every refugee possible just prior to his departure—we called it Transition America—in the hopes of answering at least a few of the endless questions on his mind; we showed documentary films; we had an Under The Trees Program in the summer months, informal rap sessions with American volunteers. We did as much as possible in the limited time and with limited resources, but none of us fooled ourselves into thinking it was nearly enough. It was a beginning only, and a modest one at that.

We provided as many recreational opportunities as possible, too. There were reading rooms, volleyball courts, art classes, televisions, soccer games, feature films. But in spite of it all, boredom

was an inevitable characteristic of the adult refugees. It was easier for the children whose natural ability to keep themselves busy gave them the chance to work off their energies. But for the adult, classroom attendance could not occupy the major part of his day; and his concerns and worries were elsewhere.

For the adult, as I suggested before, there was a prevalence of loneliness (his inability to find out anything about the family and friends he left behind was a tragic multiplier of his mood); and there was the uncertainty of his future, centered on being matched with a sponsor—and, ultimately, having to leave the camp to go to a sponsor he had never met, in a city about which he knew nothing, and in a country whose ways were still strange and from which he had at times heard the ugly noise of racism. Uncertainty indeed.

Nevertheless, the resettlement effort itself must, at least to this point, be judged a success. Most of the refugees have found their individual or group sponsor to be sup-

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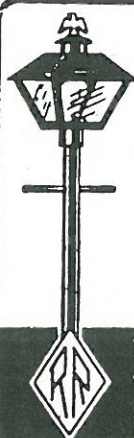
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There have been failures, of course. Perhaps the greatest number of the inevitable refugee-sponsor breakdowns occurred within the individual sponsorships, that is, a single American family volunteering sponsorship of a refugee family as opposed to group sponsorships undertaken by congregations, parishes and other groups, in which responsibilities can be shared. There will be more breakdowns but the evidence to date is that the resettlement program is working well.

Credit must go, of course, to the American tradition of voluntary efforts to help people in need; but much must be said for the Indo-Chinese, whose inner resources, all of the resilience honed over decades of learning to survive, deeply impressed the American community in camp and then across the country.

There was a by-product of our experience in camp that is worth noting because it speaks to attitudes that will go far, on both sides, in determining the final suc-

cess of resettlement and integration.


When the camp first opened, there was a considerable degree of local community opposition, reflecting in part some of the widespread criticism of the sudden influx of refugees and in part some of the local conservatism that characterizes that area of Pennsylvania. We were, therefore, uncertain about the response to our need for volunteers. We need not have been. The response was tremendous and the local opposition not only subsided but turned into support, sympathy and understanding. Perhaps even more impressive, and this was the unexpected result, was the degree to which the staff, volunteers and paid alike, felt a unique sense of commitment, and importantly, a unique sense of reward.

From volunteers and paid staff alike, the refugees received scores of letters, of which the following is a fair example: "Dear Refugees, I should like to thank you for one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Working with you this summer has been invaluable. I

have learned so much and come to appreciate the courage with which you face your new life. I shall never forget you; and I know that when you leave the camp you will find large segments of the American community eager to welcome and help you."

Just the beginning of, but an insight into, the attitudes which bode well for the refugee program.

I have touched only surfaces, however important, of the range of problems and issues, the generosity of Americans, the deep commitment which characterized life at Fort Indiantown Gap.

There were innumerable bureaucratic hassles and breakdowns, disappointments and failures. Yet, in the final analysis it was the human spirit at its best, in both Indo-Chinese and Americans, which brought the resettlement effort to its present stage. Ahead of the Indo-Chinese there lies a multitude of concerns and a need to cope of significant magnitude. But if our experience at Indiantown Gap was any measure, the human spirit will again prevail. 

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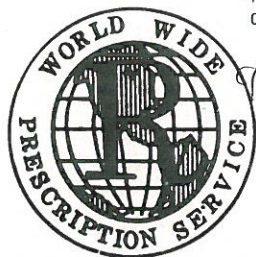
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