

THE BYSTANDER —★—

Remembering Operation Babylift

Published in the Charleston *Gazette-Mail*, July 6, 2018

Forty-three years ago, a powerful, wealthy nation was engaged in a long conflict with a small, poorer country, but in spite of its great resources, the larger nation still could not claim victory. It had to evacuate its army, sink its equipment into the ocean, shred classified documents, and return to its people, stunned, angry, and hurt. People of both nations suffered; parents from each side were separated from their children and refugees were left adrift on the seas or to live abroad in exile, as deserters. The United States, the dominant country, felt defeated, if not in war, in spirit, and ultimately lost 58,220 of its own children, in addition to 1,597 still officially missing in action.

We left South Vietnam, but not before a final gesture of humanity---perhaps a small act of atonement for some of the bombing, napalm, and war crimes. We evacuated over 10,000 Vietnamese babies who were orphans of the war. If it had not been for the destruction wrought over a decade of conflict, this act would have been remembered as an example of what can be accomplished by people when they are committed to the survival of the human family, by tending to all children, regardless of their nationality or status.

Even after the billions of dollars we spent making war, Americans found resources to spare, and during one of the darkest times in our history, Operation BabyLift was put into action. Civilian and military sectors coordinated personnel, supplies, volunteers and jet fuel in a heroic last-minute mission to gather these children and bring them to safety. It took nearly 30 trips of 30-hour flights to get them, some of whom were never properly identified as orphans and could have even been children of our “enemy.” They were temporarily housed at Presidio Army base in San Francisco to be stabilized, identified if possible, medicated as needed, clothed, and processed for the welcoming arms that waited for them throughout the world.

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This expedition was organized by Republican President Gerald Ford and, for better or worse, it was done out of the deepest fear that these children would be put in harms' way and abandoned in the chaos of war, and out of the deepest conviction that their fate was our responsibility. The image of innocent children suffering was rendered intolerable. Today, some of those adoptees still hunt for their biological Vietnamese parents; but the rescue was done in the highest manifestation of our biological instincts, to protect children by any and all available means.

That was April, 1975. In April, 2018, another Republican President, imagining that we are at war with smaller, poorer countries and insisting that we are being invaded and infested, incarcerates refugees from those countries. Many of them were hoping to escape hardship and violence in their own homelands. Some of those trying to get here, trespassing on American soil, brought along their sons and daughters in their own biological instinct to protect them.

But *those* children will not be rescued or brought to safety by our country. There will be no Operation BabyLift for them. They are not orphans or prisoners of war, but yet they are held captive and terrorized by separation of family, the weapon of destruction we have chosen to deploy just for political leverage. These children have no treaty, no standing, and no assurance that guardians will be waiting to ensure that their lives might be enriched after this tragedy. Reunification will likely be preceded by an extended, frustrating bureaucratic process of searching for their parents, and parents searching for their children.

The circumstances of these two situations do not need to be identical for the analogy to be obvious. It's the people in power and their policies that make the results polar opposites. Today, we're still big, powerful and wealthy, but something has changed. Which country did those refugees think they were fleeing to: the America of 1975 that followed its conscience, or the unrecognizable America we've become today?