

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MAY 6, 1975

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

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THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS CONFERENCE  
OF

HUGH SCOTT

SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA

JOHN J. RHODES

REPRESENTATIVE FROM THE STATE OF ARIZONA

AND

HAMILTON FISH, JR.

REPRESENTATIVE FROM THE STATE OF NEW YORK

THE BRIEFING ROOM

9:18 A.M. EDT

MR. NESSEN: The meeting with Congressional Republican leaders this morning was devoted almost 100 percent to the question of refugee evacuation and aid.

We have brought out for you to talk to Senator Scott, Congressman Rhodes and Congressman Hamilton Fish, who is the ranking Republican on the refugee subcommittee.

Let me just say one or two things before we start.

One is that Ambassador Brown was there this morning and gave a factual report on the refugee situation. He made a couple of points that have not been made, I don't think, publicly before.

One is that 60 percent of the refugees are children and, therefore, will not be out seeking jobs. Only 35,000 of the refugees are heads of households, and many of those have skills which will enable them to get jobs without competing with Americans.

Ambassador Brown will have a news conference at the State Department at noon, for those of you who are interested.

The President once again very strongly stated his views that these refugees rightly were evacuated to save their lives, and he feels that morally it is right for the United States to help these refugees get started in a new country, that their numbers are very small compared to the normal annual immigration of 400,000 people to the United States.

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That has nothing to do with Vietnam. The normal number of immigrants to the United States is 400,000 a year. The Congressmen and Senator Scott will give you more details.

Q So what? So you mean this has no impact or what?

MR. NESSEN: I will let the Senator and Congressmen take it from there.

SENATOR SCOTT: Approximately 400,000. If you look at today's Congressional Record, you will see that I put in the unemployment figures and the rate of immigration for the years 1930 to 1939.

I believe that although the figure dropped substantially later in 1930, we had 8.9 percent unemployed, and we brought into this country on a much lower population base 241,000 immigrants.

The President feels very strongly on this -- as did those of us who were there -- that these people are in this country, that we have a double obligation to them.

First, a strong moral obligation and second an obligation under the refugee protocols, which is why they are in here under waivers.

We believe that many of them will find employment, some of them self-employment by virtue of their skills. We generally feel very strongly, as does the President, that any thought that they should be sent home is a callous sort of thing. I expressed that as my sentiment in any event.

I understand that Senators Case and Sparkman will introduce the Administration bill in the Senate. Members of the House will speak for themselves. I will cosponsor it with others.

We hope that this time the Congress will not dicker or delay unnecessarily, as this is a matter of resettlement and is strictly an assumption of an obligation which is with us and which we believe will -- in the mood of Americans that we have grown to respect and honor in the past -- enable us to go on with the job, the very important job of looking after people who boarded with their feet.

Q Can you tell us --

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SENATOR SCOTT: Why don't we wait for questions until we get the other statements.

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I have no statement. I would like to yield to Congressman Fish, who is the ranking Republican Member of the Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration.

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CONGRESSMAN FISH: Thank you.

Yesterday, the bill that the White House sent up to us, The Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975, was introduced jointly by Congressman Broomfield, of the International Affairs Committee; Congressman Hutchinson, the ranking Republican on Judiciary, and myself. This measure will be referred to our sub-committee and I hope that we will act on it very promptly.

In the course of testimony yesterday before us, Ambassador Brown went to some lengths on this to put to rest any fears that people have that these refugees into the United States will cause a severe economic impact.

I would just like to address myself to that one point. As the Senator mentioned, we are talking no more than 35,000, maybe less than that, who are heads of households. The people that would be normally -- the ones at least for the near term -- seeking employment.

Number two, by far the largest category that we on the committee approved for parolling into the United States were next-of-kin of Vietnamese in the United States who were either citizens or here lawfully for permanent residence.

These people would have been admitted to the United States anyway under petition as members of the family and they, of course, are the moral obligation of the sponsors in this country to see that they don't become a public charge.

Very great care is being taken in the course of resettlement to settle people thinly over the United States so that there will not be any concentration of refugees in areas that presently have a high rate of unemployment.

I think the other important fact is that the degree of education, of English language spoken excellently by a substantial minority of these people, and others who speak it fairly well, is going to help in their assimilation.

Thank you very much.

Q Senator Scott, do you think that in any of the opposition to the refugees coming to this country there is any overt or latent racism?

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SENATOR SCOTT: I think some of that nastiness has erupted, not a great deal, but enough to make you sick. I think that also it is regrettable that the appeals on television and through the press have not yet focused on the need for substantial American participation in the funding by individuals of voluntary relief programs such as are being carried on, for example, ecumenically in Georgetown by St. John's Episcopal and by Holy Trinity Catholic Church.

I think we ought to enlist the American Heritage Foundation, Common Cause, American Civil Liberties Union. I have nothing but praise for the AFL-CIO in their clear and unafraid commitment favorable to the refugee problem.

Americans are accustomed to responding but they are accustomed to responding to leadership. I have not yet seen that leadership where it belongs and I think it ought to be exerted.

Q What leadership? Here in the White House, Senator, or some place else?

SENATOR SCOTT: The leadership will be exerted here. The President will have a press conference tonight. He has already made it very clear how strongly he supports the program. The Administration bill goes in today. The leadership is being expressed when I express it, when others express it on the Hill. We are not running off to Cuba to divert attention from the serious problem. We are not asking that they go back in any sort of people-killing program.

We are exerting that leadership and some of the churches are exerting it. I am saying that by speaking sharply, as I do here, maybe I can stimulate more of it. It is done in a friendly way, but it is done out of a deep and heartfelt and compassionate conviction on my part.

Q Senator, we are talking about Senator McGovern now, and he made this proposal that all of these people be shipped back. Now, where is this settlement coming from and how much of it is there on the Hill?

SENATOR SCOTT: I think it is slight. I think it comes from people who are betraying their professed liberalism in so doing. They are certainly not talking like libertarians.

I think it represents a combination of the fearful, among some people who fear for their jobs, and of exploitation by some of the highly literate -- professing liberals -- who, as I say, are betraying their own principles when they talk about sending these helpless people back.

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Only 45 of the 125,000 people -- 45 people -- have asked to be sent back and they were the 45 that were swept up by the Thai soldiery in the course of evacuation.

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: Don't you think, also, some of our colleagues are estimating public opinion incorrectly?

SENATOR SCOTT: Absolutely. My mail is hardly any on this subject.

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CONGRESSMAN RHODES: Ambassador Brown said just a while ago that they had put on three or four people extra to take the phone calls from those Americans who want to adopt Vietnamese. He said they have had to raise that number to 20, just to take the phone calls and to reply to them.

The American people are not responding to refugees in a negative sort of way. It is only certain segments of the American population, and unfortunately, many of them here in Washington are leading the negativism.

Q Are you predicting that the aid that the President has asked, \$507 million would be enacted, passed?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: I certainly feel some bill will be enacted. Whether it will be the full amount is a matter I think for committees to determine and Congressman Fish would possibly like to comment on that. But I certainly have every belief that this Congress will support the President's request.

Q Is the program over? Are the refugees here now who will be coming in? Is that the cutoff?

CONGRESSMAN RHODES: No, there are still many of them on Guam. I will yield to Congressman Fish on that, who has, I think, better input.

CONGRESSMAN FISH: I understand some 20,000 have arrived in the United States, of which already 11,000 have been processed through the staging areas in this country in three camps, in the society, but that leaves an additional in excess of 100,000 that are either presently on Guam, some 50,000 there, Wake Island, some 8,000, an untold number we are not sure of are still at sea that have been picked up by American vessels and cargo vessels in the South China Sea; people had just got in all kinds of boats and left the island in the southern part of South Vietnam.

So, they have just begun -- a smaller group is presently in the United States. As regards to legislation, the Administration measure is based on a similar enactment by Congress in 1962 that paved the way for the large numbers of Cubans to subsequently come into this country.

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It is at very little variance from a bill I introduced on April 24, and other Members introduced a few days later, so we have no disagreement as to the focus of the legislation.

Obviously, the dollar figure is not that matter of great concern to us in authorizing legislation. The case will have to be made, as we get a clearer picture of the exact numbers, in the appropriations process.

Q Senator Scott, was there anyone in this morning's meeting who expressed concern about the influx of refugees? Was everybody there positive?

SENATOR SCOTT: There were some mild questions on whether or not the refugees would be fairly distributed around the country and whether there would be an effort to avoid any impact on areas of high employment. They were just seeking for information and the assurances were given that that in fact would be done.

Commenting on another question about Congress, I think Congress will soon learn that the innate decency and sense of obligation and morality of the American people will be asserting itself.

I have spoken, before getting mail from my constituents, because I think it is time when leadership should not wait to weight the mail but should act on the evidence. There will always be some who oppose anything the President wants to do, and try to render it nugatory, but I regret the presense of these nugatorians, and you can consider the root origin of that word.

Q Was there any discussion of Ambassador Martin's handling of the evacuation process?

SENATOR SCOTT: Only that the President spoke with great pride of the fact that Ambassador Martin had a very strong personality and very strong feelings, that he obeyed the orders which the President sent him, that he had successfully conducted the evacuation. And I made the point, which I have trouble finding anywhere else, that while their was a good deal of play on the fact that the Ambassador brought his poodle out, there was nothing said about the fact that he left his son in.

His son was killed in the war, which might explain the depth and strength of his feelings.

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Q Senator, you expressed, or voiced, considerable criticism of some of your colleagues here.

SENATOR SCOTT: Only one so far, as you identified it.

Q I did not identify it. Mr. Bell identified it. You and I both spoke collectively and generally.

SENATOR SCOTT: Collectively.

Q I was wondering, did the President share this criticism? Was President Ford at all critical of the attitudes which we have discussed here which he has seen raising its head?

SENATOR SCOTT: I don't think the President expressed any criticism of personalities or groups except to say he felt very strongly himself on the success of the evacuation and of the moral and legal obligation of the United States with regard to reception and resettlement.

He did not speak critically.

Q Was he disappointed -- not attributing them to Senator McGovern or anyone else -- did he express any disappointment or shock, as I think the Post said this morning, about these attitudes that have come up, the reluctance to take the refugees?

SENATOR SCOTT: I have forgotten the word he used, but he expressed that it was shocking. He was amazed that there would be hesitancy shown and that criticism would erupt. He said, "In fact, it makes me damned mad." I guess that is a reaction.

THE PRESS: Thank you, gentlemen.

MR. NESSEN: Thank you, gentlemen.

END (AT 9:39 A.M. EDT)