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OPERATION BABYLIFT AND THE ADOPTION OF VIETNAMESE ORPHANS:
THE COVERAGE GIVEN BY FOUR AMERICAN MAGAZINES, 1975-1976

by

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This study undertakes a detailed look at how four American magazines responded to the events surrounding the government-sponsored airlift of over 2,000 children from orphanages in Saigon, South Vietnam, in the final days of the Vietnam War, and their subsequent adoptions by Americans.

The four publications singled out for inclusion were selected because of their quality, their commitment to investigative journalism, their coverage of the subjects, and because they represent four magazine categories (as distinguished by SRDS): MS., the women's market; Newsweek, news and editorial; Saturday Review, opinion and review; and Commonweal, religious.

Chapter I begins with background about the Vietnamese people, their history, the Vietnam War, its impact upon American society, the plight of the Vietnamese orphans, and the fall of Saigon. Chapter II summarizes the coverage given to the Babylift and the adoptions in the American press, then looks at coverage by the magazine press in general before considering in detail the coverage in MS., Saturday Review, Newsweek, and Commonweal. Chapter III provides an update and discusses the role of the press in wartime, with special consideration of the role of the press in the Vietnam War.

The study concludes with a brief afterword by the author.

To Lee Young, for his inspiring teaching, his encouragement, his guidance on this project, and his friendship,

To Del Brinkman and Mike Kautsch for serving on my committee,

To Don Jugenheimer for manifold assistance through these years as I've completed my degree,

To the other faculty I've had the privilege of studying under at the William Allen White School of Journalism,

And to my loving family--Jay, Alison, Brendon and Kimberly--who give me strength without knowing it,

I dedicate this project.

Andrea Warren
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INTRODUCTION

April 5, 1975, as the city of Saigon, South Vietnam, was about to surrender to the communist forces of North Vietnam, President Gerald Ford sent America's largest military transport, the C-5A, into Saigon to evacuate 320 orphans who were in various stages of processing for adoption by American families. As the plane took off from Tan Son Nhut Airport, a rear cargo door blew out. The plane crashed into a rice paddy, killing 178 of the children and 40 of the adult escorts aboard, and badly injuring many of the survivors.

The story made headlines around the world. During the ensuing three days, the press focused upon the fleet of commercial jets subsequently dispatched by the American government to pick up the survivors and an estimated 2,300 additional children from Saigon orphanages.

The airlifting of the children from the dying city of Saigon had no precedent in history. Every major newspaper in America featured pictures of Vietnamese children being placed in the waiting arms of their new American parents. The press turned the whole episode into a media event, featuring these "happy ending" pictures alongside the heart-wrenching ones arriving hourly over the wires from Saigon--pictures of people clinging desperately to helicopters in search of passage out of South Vietnam, fleeing refugees, tearful partings of Vietnamese and American friends, and, finally, communist tanks rumbling through the streets of Saigon.

In the midst of our humiliating defeat in Vietnam, the American

public rallied to the plight of the orphans and their passage out of war. We welcomed the orphans with open arms. The press flooded its considerable attention upon the children and their new parents. A toll-free number was set up in Washington, D.C., to handle all the thousands of inquiries that came pouring in about how to adopt one of the orphans. At times, more than a thousand calls a minute were turned away by busy signals, even though the press had reported that nearly all of the children were destined for already designated families who had been working for up to two years to adopt them. President Ford increased the public pandemonium when he flew to San Francisco to greet the first airlift plane and carry the first orphan onto American soil. To waiting reporters he commented, "This is the least we can do, and we will do much, much more."¹

Eager to see something positive come out of the war, the press and the public viewed the airlift of the orphans and their adoptions by Americans as heart-warming, exciting events. But from the beginning, some writers voiced opposition. They undertook an examination of its ramifications upon the children, their adoptive parents, society as a whole, and future relations between Vietnam and the United States. In the 18 months following the Babylift, magazines as diverse as MS, Science Digest, Christian Century, Psychology Today and The Ladies' Home Journal tackled the issues in articles and reflective pieces. Norman Cousins, Shana Alexander, Grace Paley, Gloria Emerson and Meg Greenfield were among the writers. Their opinions were diverse. Commentary ranged from Desmond Smith's diatribe in The Nation wherein he said, "This traffic

¹Time, "The Bitter Legacy of the Babylift," 14 April 1975, p. 15.

in other people's children is body-snatching at its worst,"² to columnist Meg Greenfield's plea of, "Why should people be made to feel ashamed of a necessarily sad and imperfect effort to rescue a lonely child? It's not as if we had a shortage of things to be ashamed of."³

Was the Babylift a humanitarian gesture? Or was it political propaganda? Were the adoptions efforts to rescue endangered children? Or were they, as some writers suggested, a way to supplement the dwindling supply of babies available for adoption in the U.S.?

The magazine press explored these issues in subsequent months, and a few continued as long as three years later. Together, these articles ignited heated debates within these publications as both sides aired their views.

Four periodicals serve as examples of the involvement in the magazine press. These four, representing, respectively, (as classified by SRDS) the opinion, news, women's and religious markets, are Saturday Review, Newsweek, MS., and Commonweal. Each of these magazines tackled the most difficult questions raised by the Babylift and each allowed opposing views to be published in reply to initial articles.

In this consideration of the coverage afforded by these four publications, the following guidelines are adhered to:

Primary sources are articles, editorials and letters to the editors that appeared in each of the four in 1975 and 1976. Secondary sources are articles that appeared in these publications prior to and following those dates, as well as articles in other publications, and

²Desmond Smith, "Second Hand Babies: Vietnamese Orphans," The Nation, 19 April 1975, p. 454.

³Meg Greenfield, "Tran Van Jones," Newsweek, 28 April 1975, p. 31.

books that provide information useful in examining the topics at hand.

At work is an operational definition of the Babylift as the airlifting of Vietnamese children from Saigon orphanages out of the city of Saigon between April 5 and April 10, 1975, on U.S. transport planes sent by the U.S. government. Non-government-sponsored flights by church groups and such individuals as Ed Daley of World Airways and Hugh Hefner (who sent his Playboy Jet, staffed with Bunnies, to bring a load of orphans out for a private group) are not considered. Although mention will be made of the children airlifted out who were not orphans, the primary consideration will be orphaned children already scheduled for adoption by American families and whose adoptive paperwork was already underway at the time of the Babylift. ✓

In order to understand the dynamics at work when considering the sensitive issue of the Babylift and the subsequent adoption of Vietnamese children by Americans, it is first helpful to have some background about the Vietnamese, and their social/family structure, the war, its impact upon American and Vietnamese society, the plight of the orphans, and the fall of Saigon. With that in mind, Chapter I, within the confines of the space limitations of this project, reviews this background in order to help the reader understand the events leading up to the Babylift.

Chapter II summarizes the coverage given to the Babylift and the adoptions by the magazine press, then considers in detail the coverage by MS., Saturday Review, Commonweal, and Newsweek.

Chapter III updates the events under consideration and looks at one particular article to appear in the magazine press since 1976. Chapter III also discusses the power of the press to influence war, and particularly the Vietnam War, by considering the press's strengths and weaknesses in covering warfare.

A brief Afterword explains how the author got interested in the study presented here and its value to her.

This study can provide no answers to the issues under discussion. The Babylift was controversial at best, a debacle at worst. While it was without precedent in history, however, the adoption of war orphans by Americans was not. Following both world wars, as well as the Korean War, thousands of German, French and Korean children were adopted by American families, but their passage to America was via private, rather than government sponsorship.

For the reader with little background in the issues surrounding the Babylift and the adoption of the Vietnamese orphans by Americans, one question can serve as the key in considering magazine coverage of the issues: did our government have the right to assist in the expatriation of more than 2,000 children from a tiny country halfway around the world from us that had already suffered greatly in an American-sponsored war? Many members of the magazine press thought not, and dared to openly criticize the government and its role, thus exercising its power as a national watchdog in the best of journalistic tradition.

What the press did not do, which might have proved just as valuable, was to speculate on whether early and frequent attention by the media on the plight of Vietnamese orphans might have made a significant difference for the children as a whole and perhaps made it possible for them to stay in their homeland--provided press attention had resulted in better conditions for them there.

While it is a moot question, it is a disburbing one, and will be considered at the end of this paper.

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CHAPTER I

"AN IMPOSSIBLE WAR"

Few of us now over 30 will ever forget images seared on our memories of a war detailed on our television screens each evening at 6 p.m. for a full decade.

As we prepared and ate our dinners in our secure homes in a country almost void of starvation and bombings, with no threat of an invading army and little concern about the stability of our government, we grew accustomed to the television noises of rumbling trucks and tanks, sniper fire and the familiar scenes of helicopters circling low to pick up the wounded, and American GI's cautiously advancing through tropical jungles looking for "Charlie."

Although this war we watched nightly in our living rooms lacked the familiar faces and the farcical plots of "M*A*S*H," so many similarities existed between the real war and the re-enacted one that many times it was difficult to tell them apart. Except, of course, that the bloodshed and pain depicted on the evening news were real.

For ten years, from 1965 to 1975, the Vietnam War was part of our daily consciousness as a nation. It divided us as a people on such issues as the draft as well as the rightness of our involvement in the politics and warfare of the tiny nation of South Vietnam, a country roughly the size of the state of Nebraska with 100 times as many people per square mile as the state of Kansas. The decade of Vietnam brought

rioting to American campuses, saw a president resign in disgrace, and witnessed the drug culture come of age in the United States. Vietnam was the first major war we had lost and it was the first war we had witnessed on a daily basis on television. Newsreels had shown us the world wars and the Korean Conflict and we had seen bombed-out rubble and dead bodies. But we saw them in black and white and we saw them in movie theaters. When the war moved into our homes via our televisions, we were not so successful as a people in remaining detached from what we saw.

And we saw it all. The photographers were there to record the aftermath of the My Lai Massacre; they were there to take pictures of Vietnamese children, burned by American napalm, running in terror down a road; they photographed the Buddhist priests who set themselves ablaze to protest the war and the South Vietnamese government's treatment of Buddhists. They stayed until the final hours of the war, snapping their pictures of the crush of Vietnamese humanity storming the fences around the American Embassy in Saigon, beaten back by Marines as they pleaded for passage out of the country. They recorded other visual images as well: the roads and highways clogged with soldiers and refugees fleeing the armies of North Vietnam; helicopters landing on the decks of American carriers to unload their passengers, then being pushed into the sea to make way for more helicopters; and the incredible pictures taken at Tan Son Nhut Airport where Vietnamese so desperate for passage out of the country that they would try anything, clung to the wheel wells of departing aircraft--only to be crushed to death when the landing gear was lifted.

Few happy pictures came out of the fall of South Vietnam in April

of 1975. Newsmen recorded what they saw--the inglorious end to an inglorious war that had claimed the lives of more than 57,000 American soldiers and wounded another 300,000. It's no wonder, amid the shambles of Saigon's final days, that the American press concentrated so heavily on just one incident. It had all the makings of a good news story--drama, interesting characters, intrigue, tragedy, and an overflow of human interest and good picture possibilities. Babies always make good news copy, and a story on a whole planeload of babies--orphans, yet--flying out of the dying city of Saigon to adoptive families in the United States was a newsman's dream.

For the press, Operation Babylift--the name given to the procedure sanctioned by the U.S. government that airlifted over 2,000 children out of Saigon to new homes in this country--offered relief from terror and slaughter. It offered the American public the same. We watched with tears in our eyes as President Ford carried the first orphan from the giant 747 that had landed at San Francisco onto American soil. We wept openly at the ensuing scenes of orphans meeting their new adoptive parents at airports around the country, and we smiled approvingly at the stories filling our newspapers and evening news of children with names like Nguyen Co Linh becoming Timmy Smith. Although thousands of Americans jammed the wires of the phone bank set up in Washington, D.C., to handle inquiries about how to adopt the orphans, they were told, almost without fail, that the children were already in the process of being adopted by families who had been working on the adoptions for up to two years each.

The newspaper, radio and television press quickly passed over the issue of whether all of the children who came aboard the Babylift were

actually orphans, continuing to dwell on their one positive story even as they reported all the bad news from South Vietnam. "I never saw so many happy kids in my life," an Air Force officer involved in the Babylift was quoted in one paper. "It was like out of a dream for them."⁴

It remained for elements of the magazine press, with the thoughtfulness provided by time to reflect--which newspaper writers often lack--to bring up the hard issues surrounding the Babylift. It was the magazine press that not only questioned whether the United States government had the right to remove over 2,000 children from their native culture to be raised as minorities in a white culture, but also questioned whether all of the children were indeed orphans. The magazine press also challenged the government as to whether it was just plain fair to the tiny nation of South Vietnam to take its children and make them into Americans. In equal numbers, the magazine press defended or condemned the Babylift. Some publications provided space to allow coverage of both viewpoints. An examination of the Newspaper Index and the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature reveals debate on the controversy surrounding the Babylift and the government's role in it received little attention anywhere but in magazines.

American writers have spent the past seven years reflecting on why we lost the war in Vietnam. Over and over they come to the same conclusion: we were doomed from the start. We Americans simply didn't know how to fight a war there.

⁴"Orphans Now Safe After Pacific Flight," Omaha World-Herald, 4 April 1975, p. 4.



The Crossroads of Southeast Asia

Source for Map: The Vietnam Experience. Setting the Stage by Edward Doyle, Samuel Lipsman & the Editors of Boston Publishing Co. Boston: 1981.

Vietnamese history and the history of the Vietnam War offer clues as to why, and also help to explain the whys and wherefores of the Babylift. It is a complex history, one that is difficult to summarize.

The origin of the Vietnamese people is shrouded in myth and legend. One of the more realistic theories is that they were once a tribe in China that was driven south by other tribes and settled south of the Yangtze River in the Red River Delta. Another plausible theory is that they originated in the Delta and developed social and cultural affinities to the Thai and Indonesian races.

Vietnam rarely knew peace in its long history. China ruled Vietnam uneasily for over a thousand years, never successfully assimilating this proud people within their Empire. However, the Vietnamese learned from their Chinese overlords, paying them tribute and looking to them for protection in times of crisis, and absorbing their technical and administrative knowledge. Because of this Chinese influence, the Vietnamese became the most advanced people of the Indochina Peninsula. They were also one of the richest, for the land, covered with mountains, jungles and plains, yields rich minerals, rubber, and rice. So abundant are the harvests from its 12 million acres of rice fields that during an average year North and South Vietnam combined is one of the five or six largest producers of rice in the world.

Its language has set it apart, and, indeed, was one of the major barriers faced by Americans in Vietnam. A blending of Cambodian, Thai and Chinese elements, Vietnamese is a tonal language. Each syllable can be pronounced with six different vocal inflections, each of which results in a different meaning. The word "ma," for example, can mean

ghost, cheek, but, grave, horse, or rice seedling, depending on the vocal inflection. Because of this complexity, it was often impossible for an American soldier entering a village to identify friends from foe.⁵

Because its land is so rich and because of its easy access to the sea, Vietnam has always been coveted by its neighbors. In addition to China, other countries repeatedly invaded Vietnam and were repeatedly repelled, or even invaded in turn. Slowly the Vietnamese conquered the land to their south, until they engulfed what is roughly the present boundaries of the North and South. In her epic history of Vietnam, Frances Fitzgerald commented on early Viet history:

Hemmed in by China to the north and the Hindu kingdom of Champa to the south, the Vietnamese lived for the bulk of their history within the closed circle of the Red River Delta. They conquered Champa and moved south down the narrow littoral, but they might by American or Chinese standards have been standing still, for it took them five centuries to conquer a strip of land the length of Florida. The Vietnamese pride themselves less on their conquests than on their ability to resist and to survive. Living under the great wing of China, they bought their independence and maintained it only at a high price of blood. Throughout their history they have had to acknowledge the preponderance of the great Middle Kingdom both as the power and as the hub of culture. The Vietnamese knew their place in the world and guarded it jealously.⁶

Missionaries arrived in the early sixteenth century, introducing Catholicism into the strongly Buddhist culture. The Vietnamese absorbed the new religion, adding to it their beliefs in animism and ancestor worship, and slowly they began establishing limited trade with European countries, notably the French.

⁵Edward Doyle and Samuel Lipsman, The Vietnam Experience: Setting the Stage (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1981) p. 23.

⁶Frances Fitzgerald, Fire in the Lake (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972) p. 8.

Not content to merely trade with the rich Vietnamese, Napoleon III ordered the invasion of Vietnam by French troops in 1857. The Vietnamese resisted fiercely and held out for 16 years. The Indochinese Union, consisting of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, was established by the French in 1893. While Cambodia and Laos seemed tolerant of their French masters, the Vietnamese continued their sporadic but stubborn opposition to the French for the next half century.

During World War II, the Japanese conquered the Indochinese Peninsula. In the fall of 1945, with the withdrawal of the Japanese and before the return of the French, the China-based League for the Independence of Viet-Nam, known as the Viet-Minh, proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam with Hanoi as its capital. The coalition was led by Ho Chi Minh, a Vietnamese communist trained in China.

The French returned in September of 1945. Unable to negotiate a peace with the Viet-Minh, war started between them. It ended with the fall of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 and a solid victory for the Viet-Minh. The resulting Geneva Agreement partitioned Vietnam along the 17th parallel, pending a general election to unite the North and the South. The elections were never held. The North, with Hanoi as its capital and Ho Chi Minh as its leader, was backed by China and the Soviet bloc governments. The South, with Saigon as its capital and support from France, elected Ngo Dinh Diem as president and proclaimed a democratic anti-communist government.

Diem wanted France out of South Vietnam altogether, but had other, major problems to contend with first. He was a Catholic trying to govern a Buddhist country; a half million refugees who had fled from the North to the South at the time of the partitioning needed resettle-

ment; land reform was a pressing problem, and the communists were constantly stirring up rebellion. By use of totalitarian propaganda methods and his secret police, Diem succeeded in eliminating the French. Fearful of the Domino Theory in Indochina, the United States began, under President Eisenhower, to send aid--monies used by Diem to build up the army, persecute his critics and allow him to live in regal style.

Diem was overthrown in a military coup in 1963 and executed. Saigon saw nine changes of government before Air Vice Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky secured the country. By then, Hanoi had taken advantage of all the disruption to actively pursue its goal of taking over the South. The army of the National Liberation Front--the Viet Cong--steadily infiltrated the country. By 1965, in the opinion of U.S. military experts, about 150,000 Viet Cong were in the South.

President John F. Kennedy sent in ever-increasing numbers of U.S. military advisers--they numbered 17,000 by the end of 1963--and President Lyndon B. Johnson, in 1965, ordered the bombing of North Vietnam in an effort to stop the Viet Cong infiltration. Under President Johnson, Congress authorized the first combat troops, 3,500 U.S. marines, into South Vietnam. They landed at DaNang in March of 1965. By July, their numbers had reached 75,000.

For the American GI, it was an impossible war to fight:

Young men from the small towns of America, the GIs who came to Vietnam, found themselves in a place halfway round the earth among people with whom they could make no human contact. Like an Orwellian army, they knew everything about military tactics, but nothing about where they were or who the enemy was. And they found themselves not attacking fixed positions but walking through the jungle or through villages among small yellow people, as strange and exposed among them

as if they were Martians. Their buddies were killed by land mines, sniper fire, and mortar attacks, but the enemy remained invisible, not only in the jungle but among the people of the villages--an almost metaphysical enemy who inflicted upon them heat, boredom, terror, and death, and gave them nothing to show for it--no territory taken, no visible sign of progress except the bodies of small yellow men.⁷

Novelist James Jones went to South Vietnam to record his impressions for the New York Times. He quickly saw the beauty--and the deadliness--of what the U.S. soldier was up against:

It was fantastically beautiful country. Or would have been, if it had not been for the war. Across the dun flatlands dozens of streams and rivers outlined in greenery moved from the feet of the mountains to the water of the great bay. Little three- and four-house hamlets and single farm dwellings crouched under their canopies of coco palm and fleshy fan-leafed banana plants in the flat dun landscape. Water buffaloes and cone-hatted people moved with tropical lassitude in the dun heat-shimmering fields.

But each hamlet had its protective machinegun bunker and accordion wire, each single house its wire and red-striped yellow flag, each road its concertina roadblocks, each river its strung-wire water-traffic blocks and sentries along the banks.⁸

Another novelist who visited Vietnam, Goerge N. Allen, felt, as did Frances Fitzgerald, that the war was a lost cause:

The Vietnamese were a small, quiet, reserved people, bound by tradition, and they felt the Americans were too big, too loud, too pushy, and too rich. We bought up a lot of their women, the Vietnamese men told me, and when we killed someone, we thought we could buy our way out of the guilt by giving the family some money. We would destroy a whole village and then offer the survivors money, thinking that would reduce our shame, they said. And what about those stories about Americans throwing civilians out of helicopters? What they heard was that we would take two prisoners up in a helicopter and ask them questions. If they

⁷Ibid., p. 370.

⁸James Jones, Viet Journal (New York: Delacorte Press, 1974) p. 131.

wouldn't talk, we would throw one out, to scare the second one into talking. And a lot of people we killed, thinking they were VC, I was told, weren't at all.

I now knew that the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people simply weren't with us. The average Vietnamese peasant felt about us just about the same as the average GI felt about them. I wondered if there ever had been a war before in which people who were supposed to be allies hated each other so much.⁹

Still, the U.S. government remained optimistic, committing more money and more troops to the cause until, at the height of the war, over 500,000 Americans fought alongside the 600,000 Vietnamese troops. Why were we so certain the war could be won? This memo from one of President Johnson's special assistants, dated February 28, 1967, and published in the infamous Pentagon Papers, perhaps offers a key:

After almost a year full-time in Vietnam, and six trips there, I felt able to learn a good deal more from my 11 days in-country, 13-23 Feb. I return more optimistic than ever before. The cumulative change since my first visit last April is dramatic, if not yet visibly demonstrable in all respects. Indeed, I'll reaffirm even more vigorously my prognosis of last November which would be achieved in 1967 on almost every front in Vietnam.

Wastefully, expensively, but nonetheless indisputably, we are winning the war in the South. Few of our programs--civil or military--are very efficient, but we are grinding the enemy down by sheer weight and mass. And the cumulative impact of all we have set in motion is beginning to tell. Pacification still lags the most, yet even it is moving forward.

Indeed, my broad feeling, with due allowance for oversimplification, is that our side now has in presently programmed levels, all the men, money and other resources needed to achieve success. . . .¹⁰

At the height of the war, in 1968 and 1969, America was dropping 1.2 million tons of bombs costing \$14 billion on Vietnam in 12 months' time; 1,195,000 acres of land were defoliated by the military, and troops destroyed another 220,000 acres of crops each of those years.

⁹George Allen, Ri (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978) p. 44.

¹⁰Neil Sheehan et. al, The Pentagon Papers (Toronto: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971) p. 555.

In those same two years, almost 600,000 refugees were generated within the tiny country of South Vietnam, and civilian casualties were estimated at 130,000 a month.¹¹

Washington and Saigon did their best to keep track of the statistics. The media duly announced the figures of U.S. dead and missing in action. Neither Saigon or Washington, however, had time to look behind the toll of civilian casualties to see what was happening to the population of South Vietnam caught in the midst of the war. As she researched her book on Vietnamese history, Frances Fitzgerald, who visited South Vietnam several times, considered it:

Still, the physical destruction is not, perhaps, the worst of it. The destruction of an entire society--"that is, above all, what the Vietnamese blame the Americans for," said one Vietnamese scholar. "Willfully or not, they have tended to destroy what is most precious to us: family, friendship, our manner of expressing ourselves." For all these years, the columns in the Saigon newspapers denouncing Americans for destroying "Vietnamese culture" have sounded somehow fatuous and inadequate to those Americans who witnessed the U.S. bombing raids. But the Vietnamese kept their sights on what is permanent and irreparable. Physical death is everywhere, but it is the social death caused by destruction of the family that is of overriding importance.

The French colonial presence and the first Indochina war swept away the Vietnamese state and the order of the village, but it left the family. And the family was the essence, the cell, as it were, that contained the design for the whole society. To the traditional Vietnamese the nation consisted of a landscape, "our mountains and our rivers," and the past of the family, "our ancestors." The land and the family were the two sources of national as well as personal identity. The Americans have destroyed these sources for many Vietnamese, not merely by killing people, but by forcibly separating them, by removing the people from the land and depositing them in the vast swamp-cities.¹²

Not only did the war create displaced people. It created, as all wars do, orphans. Orphans were nothing new in a country that had been

¹¹Doyle, pp. 8-9. Because of the nature of the war and its aftermath, the U.S. government, source for these figures, stresses that they are all approximates.

¹²Fitzgerald, pp. 428-9.

at war throughout much of its history, but with the upheaval of the family, the extended family that had always cared for them was no longer intact. Always before, a child had a home. If his mother and father died, then his aunt and uncle took him in. If there were no relatives, the village joined together to raise the child. The generations cared for each other. Parents treated their children well so that children would carry on ancestor worship, keeping their spirits at peace. The eldest son had the responsibility and the honor of maintaining his parents' graves, secure in the knowledge that his children would do the same for him. As a Vietnamese writer explained it:

Before the French came, there were no orphans in Vietnam. Blood relationships and friendship have always been highly valued in Vietnamese society, and it has been customary for relatives or friends to care for a child whose parents die. Such children grow up regarding their adoptive parents as their own. Love among people who live together in the same neighborhood and love between mother and child are beautiful to us.

When I was growing up in Vietnam, I often heard my grandmothers tell of children who were taken into families when their parents died. I also knew of older brothers and sisters who sacrificed their youth to take care of younger children. It was not unusual to have a cousin living with us; we have cousins who are living with us even now in Vietnam.¹³

But during the war between the French and the Viet-Minh, and particularly during the Vietnam War, with the breakdown of the family and the village, the system no longer worked. The need was too overwhelming. And while families continued to care for a vast number of the homeless and the orphans, help was needed for the others. Thus, under the French in the 1950s, the first orphanages were started--not

¹³Nguyen Thi Ngoc Thoa, "The Vietnamese Orphans," The Progressive, 6 June 1975, p. 16.

by the state, but by the churches. Buddhist and Catholic nuns-- the latter often trained in France and members of French orders--ran them, taking in not only the orphaned, but the children whose parents were living but could not care for them and needed a safe place for them. Often mothers placed their children with the Sisters because their husbands were either in the army or dead and they were the sole support of aged parents, perhaps other relatives, and other children. Many parents planned to return for their children when they could, and some even contributed to their children's cost of care to ensure they got enough food. Although the Sisters placed some children for adoption, this was never done if a relative--any relative--was known to be alive, in the event that the relative came to claim the child. This was true even if no one had visited the child for as long as five years.

In the beginning, when the orphanages were not particularly crowded and disease was under control, they were almost like boarding schools. Indeed, some of them had fine schools and the children received first-rate educations, growing up to regard the nuns as their mothers, and leaving only when they got jobs, returning to the Sisters for all holidays.

As the scope of the French war in Vietnam increased and as the American involvement began, and refugees flooded the country, the orphanages were quickly overwhelmed with the task of caring for the orphaned and many quickly became little better than holding places. Each morning the Sisters would open the gates to find more children, abandoned in the night by parents who told them to wait for the Sisters, that the kind Sisters would give them candy if they waited, or they were brought in by neighbors after the parents were killed and no one

else could look after them. The police brought in the newborns abandoned in the maternity wards or found in trashcans or small children found wandering in the streets.

With the Vietnamese government unable to offer any aid and the problem becoming critical, Catholic orphanages turned to the church and to private contributions from abroad for relief. Eventually the U.S. government, through USAID, began giving some aid, but more was generated through small organizations that sprang up to collect needed supplies and funds and assist with critical medical care for the children.

Only a few articles appeared in the American press that called attention to the plight of the refugees and orphans. The May 28, 1973, issue of Newsweek, for example, carried a story called "Vietnam's War-Torn Children" that chronicled the problems of a generation of traumatized children, estimating that as many as one-and-a-half million had lost one or both parents to the war. Loren Jenkins, the reporter, offered a description of Vietnamese orphanages, emphasizing rat bites, filth and stench. Of the orphans' situation in general he commented, "While some have been taken in by relatives, countless others have been cast adrift in refugee camps, crammed into overcrowded orphanages, or left to wander the streets and survive by learning to steal."¹⁴

When describing the orphanages, few writers found anything positive to say. The mortality rate was routinely 80 percent, yet children

¹⁴Loren Jenkins, "Vietnam's War-Torn Children," Newsweek, 28 May 1973, p. 52.

continued to come and room was found for them because, while 25 might be added in a day's time, that many also died. An American who went to South Vietnam in 1973 to adopt a child wrote:

During the month we saw 70 orphanages. The first visits were a shock. There was a good deal of dirt, though almost always tidy dirt, as though the few and overworked attendants fought with it continuously. Beds were scarce--sometimes there were three and four children to a crib, sometimes a straw mat over wooded slats, sometimes nothing but the slats. We saw dormitories where the beds were so small that the children lay doubled up in them; we also saw a place where children were left in their beds all day because there was not enough help to take care of them. In this place, children as old as four could not walk.

One would be inclined to think that a child of four would long since have climbed or tumbled out of its crib and learned to walk on its own, but there was the question of food--and energy and strength. . . . The children who don't respond are the ones who have been totally rejected even by their peers, and they are the first to die. Infants who have had no love in their first three months are virtually doomed. Let them come down with the slightest infection, and again and again, they turn their faces to the wall and die.¹⁵

The Christian Century called attention to the plight of the orphans in a July 1974 article in which it noted that allocated aid from the U.S. Congress was not reaching Vietnamese children and called for keeping closer tabs on funds: "The question must be asked: What effect have the USAID regulations and decisions had on the hundreds of thousands of orphaned or destitute Vietnamese children living under conditions of a severely deteriorating economy, continuing warfare, and gravely inadequate care?"¹⁶

¹⁵Catherine Pomeroy Collins, "My Search for Nobody's Child," McCall's, April 1973, p. 98.

¹⁶Jane Cary Peck, "Of Politics and Vietnamese Orphans: A Call for Vigilance," Christian Century, July 1974, p. 705.

It was a November 1974 entry under the "World Progress Report" in Saturday Review that first mentioned the work of Rosemary Taylor:

Another woman, Rosemary Taylor, a 34-year-old American,* went to Vietnam in 1967 and was so appalled by what she saw that she has devoted her life to les miserables ever since. At present she supervises a staff of 200 Vietnamese and 20 professionals, including nurses and physical therapists. Her philosophy is that she must train Vietnamese personnel to do the work she sets up, and, with this in mind, she operates a two-month intensive training program for each new orphanage staff that comes into being.

Even more important, perhaps, Rosemary Taylor was responsible for the placement of almost 300 small, homeless creatures in 1973. . . . 17

(*Author's note: Rosemary Taylor is Australian.)

With the introduction of Rosemary Taylor comes the story of one of the most remarkable relief efforts ever undertaken by private individuals trying to help someone less fortunate than themselves. She writes in her account of the work of Friends For All Children (FFAC), the service agency that grew out of her effort and which helped place orphans for adoption with families around the world, that:

We were primarily a salvage operation in a time of warfare. We were there to help gather up the debris while mightier powers laboured over ultimate solutions. One foreign company concentrated on collecting the mountains of scrap metal that littered the countryside and marketed it profitably in Korea. Our very small war effort was to collect the human litter, too insignificant for the concern of the military strategists, the newborn mites who were abandoned daily throughout the country in the maternities, orphanages, hospitals and scrap heaps. Their feeble whimper held little shock value when the blood of a nation was screaming to heaven. . . . In the eight years we were in Vietnam we opened four nurseries to care for the newborn, abandoned babies, the sick, the malnourished, the handicapped, and the hopelessly incurable. Starting out with one person, our team grew to sixteen foreigners, American, Australian, British,

¹⁷"Orphans of the Storm," Saturday Review, 30 November 1974, p. 8.

French, German and Spanish, and 400 Vietnamese nurses, child-care workers, physical therapists, early childhood development specialists, maintenance personnel, and administrative staff.¹⁸

Although the media paid little attention to the plight of the orphans (and one rightfully wonders what the results might have been for the children if it had--would a Babylift ever have been necessary? Could press attention have generated enough concern to provide for their care in their own country?) work to assist the orphanages through aid from private sources continued. Figures aren't available on the number of adoptions from Vietnam taking place worldwide, but a March 1974 issue of Time stated that "about 700 Vietnamese children are expected to arrive (in the U.S.) this year, the largest number to date."¹⁹

Rosemary Taylor and her associates also provided aid to orphanages in outlying provinces:

We distributed milk, food, clothing, and medication to the neediest orphanages, especially in the Delta, and administered vaccination programs, concentrating on polio, which was so prevalent.

The Sisters in the orphanages were being forced to operate paramedical and neonatal clinics without doctors, medication, milk or hospitals. To this extent, our ambulance became a lifeline bringing the sick babies to our child care centers in Saigon where we had access to better facilities. Increased military activity along highway 4 reduced the roads to obstacle courses.

Our frequent excursions to the northern orphanages were made by plane, and we relied on the ingenuity of many friends to find space available for us. Children were brought back to Saigon for specialized treatment and others who were completely abandoned

¹⁸Rosemary Taylor, Turn My Eyes Away (Boulder, Colo: Friends For All Children, 1976) pp. 23-25.

¹⁹"The War Orphans," Time, 25 March 1974, p. 58.

were able to be adopted into loving families.²⁰

Of special significance in her statement is their efforts to place abandoned children for adoption. Whenever possible, this was done with Vietnamese families. When it was not, Miss Taylor facilitated the adoptions for Western families, of whom she always had a waiting list.

The war changed in 1968. The so-called Tet Offensive in February of that year brought direct attacks by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese on more than 100 cities and military bases. As protests over the war by the American public increased, support for the war gradually declined in Washington, culminating in President Johnson's rejection of General Westmoreland's request for another 200,000 troops to counteract the stepped-up aggression by the North. The U.S. also restricted bombing and began gradual withdrawal of American troops in an attempt to achieve "Vietnamization" of the war. In 1973 a ceasefire agreement was signed by the U.S., the South, and the North, and thousands of American prisoners of war came home. Yet the U.S. continued to support South Vietnam with billions of dollars in economic aid and military equipment.

The war's end came suddenly. In January 1975, the North launched a major offensive against the South and took the city of Song Be and the province of Phuc Long, just 50 miles from Saigon. The North made the decision to launch its long-awaited, full-scale offensive, and South Vietnam President Thieu made the disastrous decision to withdraw troops from the central highlands in order to protect Saigon.

²⁰Taylor, p. 99.

From that point on, the South Vietnamese were on the run. Soldiers and civilians alike poured into Saigon, choking Route 7B, a little used highway into Saigon dubbed the "convoy of tears" as the panicked population tried to reach what they thought was the safety of the city, harassed all along the way by communist rockets.

The city of Hue, ancient and beautiful, the spiritual capital of Vietnam, was ordered evacuated March 25 and was quickly overrun by North Vietnamese troops. Then DaNang was pounded by communist rockets and artillery, and it too fell. The U.S. government had refused requested aid to the city but did assist with an emergency evacuation intended for civilians who would be quickly killed by the enemy because of their links with Americans. Instead, the airlift evacuation caused widespread panic and rioting; soldiers shot their way aboard departing aircraft, killing even their own relatives to be assured of a place. The sealift of DaNang was more successful: three U.S. Navy ships carried over 28,000 refugees south to the former American naval base at Cam Ranh Bay.

Four weeks later, the first rockets fell on Saigon. American officials within the city were stunned. U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin, refusing to believe the end was at hand, also refused to make preparations for an evacuation of the city, although an evacuation plan had already been devised. Called Talon Vise, or Operation Frequent Wind,²¹ it gave top evacuation priority to the estimated 7,000 American troops and civilians in the city, followed by 200,000 "endangered" South Vietnamese who had worked in some capacity with or

²¹Doyle, p. 23.

or for Americans or the U.S. military. The plan also called for the protection of South Vietnamese troops, but by now the South Vietnamese army had ceased to be an army at all. It had deteriorated into armed and dangerous individuals searching for any way possible out of the city.

Once President Thieu resigned, in essence admitting defeat, the evacuation began in earnest. For the Vietnamese, those 200,000 who were "endangered," the last hours were desperate ones. Much has been written of their struggle for places aboard the evacuation flights. Some got out. Most didn't. Reporter Keyes Beech, caught outside the American Embassy during Saigon's final days, wrote:

Once we moved into that seething mass we ceased to be correspondents. We were only men fighting for our lives, scratching, clawing, pushing ever closer to the wall. We were like animals. Now I know what it is like to be a Vietnamese. I am one of them. But if I could get over that wall I would be an American again.²¹

It's impossible, looking back, to calculate the terror and suffering of those final days. For every story told, there are a hundred more untold. And in the midst of it all, with rockets falling all around them, were the Westerners, some of them working with Rosemary Taylor, who ran the city's orphanages. With the fall of Saigon almost certain, they knew they had to leave or forfeit their lives. They also knew that once the communists began entering the city, their carefully trained Vietnamese workers would not dare report to their work in the orphanages because it would reveal their association with the Americans and endanger their lives. This would mean that for an unknown period

²¹Ibid., p. 31.

of time, the children in the orphanages would be without care. Because even at their best, health conditions in the orphanages were poor, they also knew that most of the children would die in the interim. The decision to try to evacuate the children--and particularly those children in the process of being adopted--was done out of concern for the very survival of the children. It quickly became a political issue. One writer, bitter over the U.S. evacuation of the city, wrote:

The children of Vietnam, pictured by the world as uncared-for waifs, often hungry, were the catalyst for the evacuation mania that began after the fall of Nha Trang. The people who ran the orphanages in the Saigon area made it known that they wanted their children out. This provided a ready-made propaganda issue, and not only for the well-meaning workers who helped the children.

The cynical and the selfish who were in no small number in Vietnam found it a delicious moment.

Among the last must be classed Graham Martin, who told one of his Embassy aides in a not very discreet moment that the issue of evacuation of children was marvelous propaganda. The Ambassador's feeling was that full publicity on a children's evacuation program would help direct American public--and more importantly--Congressional--opinion toward Saigon. In turn, Martin's reasoning went, Congress would vote the money so badly needed by Saigon to shore up its defenses.²³

In the midst of the riots, the slaughter and the panic that accompanied the evacuation, one plane crash had the power to stand out. Rosemary Taylor searched frantically for transportation out of the city for the children in her care who were already in the process of being adopted by European, Australian and American families. So did the heads of other orphanages in similar circumstances. When negotiations

²³Alan Dawson, 55 Days: The Fall of South Vietnam (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977) pp. 212-13.

to secure a private liner fell through, she accepted the American government's offer of the C-5A, the largest transport jet in the world. She was given several hours notice to prepare 230 of her children for evacuation and the healthiest ones in her care--those it was thought could best withstand the rigors of the long flight--were selected. All had adoptive homes awaiting them abroad.

Fifteen minutes after takeoff, the rear cargo door blew out and the plane plummeted to earth, smashing down in a rice paddy. Almost miraculously, 150 children survived the crash, though many had critical burns and others had suffered oxygen deprivation that would show up as problems ranging from mild learning disabilities to moderate mental retardation later on.

For a world weary of war and already traumatized by the events of the last few weeks in Vietnam, the crash of the C-5A added shock almost beyond belief. The media showed pictures of tiny cloth-draped victims, and teddy bears thrown clear of the wreckage. Few showed the pictures of looting South Vietnamese soldiers, the first to arrive on the scene, who plundered the living and the dead rather than offer any assistance.²⁴

Within 24 hours, Pan Am, which had not responded to the adoption agencies' earlier pleas for a plane, sent a 747 to evacuate the survivors and 200 other children. (Pan Am required a \$150,000 downpayment in cash, which was made possible through a private donation.²⁵) When

²⁴Time, 28 April 1975, p. 20.

²⁵Taylor, p. 163.

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the plane, carrying 324 children and their escorts, landed at last in San Francisco, the press around the world showed photos of President Ford carrying the first child onto American soil.

Other government-authorized flights in addition to the 747's followed, and over 2,000 children were eventually evacuated. Some went to other countries. Those who arrived in the U.S. to be met by their new adoptive parents were instant celebrities.

But even amid these joyous scenes, as Vietnamese children settled into their new lives as Americans, the other side of the coin was coming into focus. Little doubt about the advisability of the Babylift and the adoptions was cast by television and newspapers. In fact, the New York Times was one of the only papers in the country, of the major dailies, to do so. In its April 7, 1975 issue, it reported that Phan Quang Dan, Saigon's Deputy Premier for Social Welfare, predicted that the evacuation of the orphans would create a shift in world opinion, especially in the United States, in favor of South Vietnam. This would happen, he said, because of the tremendous television, radio, and press coverage the children would receive. Editorially the newspaper also questioned the motives behind the government's sanction of the Babylift.

Except for the New York Times, it was elements of the magazine press that jumped into the controversy, evading no aspect of it. Because of this, the Babylift did not become a footnote to the fall of Saigon and the end of America's tragic involvement in its first lost war. The magazine press kept the controversy raging a full 18 months after the Babylift, and even today continues to follow the ongoing

court actions still not settled that resulted from it. Before the orphans had even arrived on American soil, the magazine press began its probe.

CHAPTER II

"AN URGENT HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGE"

Should the government of the United States have become involved in Operation Babylift? Should Vietnamese children have been taken from their native country to be adopted by Americans? Although the press, magazine and newspaper alike, had basically ignored the orphans during the course of America's involvement in the war, they focused considerable attention on the Babylift and the adoptions. Newspaper press coverage stopped, for all intents, once the children were settled in their new homes. The magazine press, however, cast a critical eye on the issues surrounding the Babylift and the adoptions long afterwards.

One critic was Nguyen Thi Ngoc Thoa, a native of DaNang who now lives in Washington, D.C. While in South Vietnam, she was coordinator of the Committee of Responsibility's program for war-wounded Vietnamese children. She began her article in the June 1975 issue of The Progressive by explaining the Vietnamese concept of the extended family. She then criticized what she termed the small amount of assistance given by the American government to aid orphanages and pointed out that Buddhist orphanages tended to be neglected in favor of Catholic ones "because so many of the American agencies have a Christian orientation." Then she lashed out at American opportunism:

Vietnamese resent the opportunism of many of the American agencies. They resent allegations that the dark-skinned children of American black soldiers and Vietnamese

mothers would be subjected to more discrimination in Vietnam than in America. They particularly resent the recent spectacle of children being airlifted at gunpoint from Saigon to the United States. Fourteen Vietnamese organizations declared on April 6: "We condemn this unscrupulous intrusion, and the hideous way in which the U.S. Government and the Republic of Vietnam have made use of orphans and refugees for propaganda purposes. . . .²⁶

In an unsigned editorial in the Christian Century, the government's motivations were again questioned:

After the glow of joy over seeing American parents greet Vietnamese babies, we must now ask: Have we once again sought to salve our own consciences and soften our guilt over what we have done to Vietnam? Two years ago our government staged a media-oriented return of our prisoners of war to symbolize the arrival of "peace with honor." Now this dramatic humanitarian gesture of saving Vietnamese "orphans" from "nameless atrocities" is easing the public horror over the imminent fall of a country we once insisted was vital to our national interests. . . . Even as we rejoice in the happiness of those American families who have received Vietnamese children, we must once again look at the larger picture and consider that our government has acted in a manner that leaves it open to the charge of manipulation for public relations purposes. These are serious charges, and they come from persons close to the agony of a land we have long manipulated for our own purposes.²⁷

Also in an unsigned editorial, the New Republic criticized the government's use of the C-5A plane that crashed, "a plane not designed for passengers, and certainly not suitable for carrying infants," going on to attack President Ford's "use" of the Babylift:

When the planes touched down in San Francisco and Seattle, the doctors who rushed aboard found that many of the infants were near death. Of approximately 700 brought over in the first two planes, more than 60 were sent to hospitals in critical condition. The flight crews that had taken care of the

²⁶Nguyen Thi Ngoc Thoa, p. 7.

²⁷"Rescuing Vietnam Orphans: Mixed Motives," Christian Century, 16 April 1975, p. 374.

children were exhausted, and one plane was nearly out of milk and water when it landed. The news didn't prevent President Ford from making an appearance at the airport with his wife and symbolically carrying a Vietnamese child or two onto American soil.²⁸

One of the harshest critics of the American government, the South Vietnam government and everything associated with Operation Babylift was Gloria Emerson, a New York Times reporter who spent time in South Vietnam during the war. She wrote that "once more the American press has been duped. They have gushed and gushed over the Babylift." She reminded her readers that "it was almost forgotten during the excited, evangelical scenes at airports that it is our country that made so many Vietnamese into orphans, that destroyed villages, ripping families apart, our country that sent young Vietnamese fathers to their deaths." She continued:

Suddenly, most conveniently, in the last hours of the war, as a Communist victory seems certain, the orphans have our attention although both Saigon and Washington ignored them for years. When I was a reporter in Vietnam in 1970 and 1971, no one at the United States mission in Saigon had any idea how many homeless children there were. The subject of children abandoned by GI fathers was considered embarrassing. Inquiries were turned aside. Vietnamese officials were equally mute. There were more pressing concerns. Now the welfare of a few thousands children has become a most successful propaganda effort for us to defend and support the diseased government of Nguyen Van Thieu despite the opposition to him in the South. Babies are a nicer story than the 26 billion dollars we gave South Vietnam, nicer than the 100,000 amputees in that wretched country, more fun to read about than the 14 million acres of defoliated forest and the 800,000 acres that we bulldozed. It does not matter at all that on television a Vietnamese foster mother sobbed bitterly and strained for a last look at the child she had cared for as Vietnamese infants were put on a plane at Tan Son Nhut. There are clearly no attempts being made to find foster parents in Vietnam who could take a child; we do not want to give money for that.²⁹

²⁸"Too Little, Too Late," New Republic, 19 April 1975, p. 9.

²⁹Gloria Emerson, "Collecting Souvenirs: Operation Babylift," New Republic, 26 April 1975, p. 8.

Ms. Emerson went on to report having visited South Vietnamese orphanages and finding them "sad places." She also repeated the statement attributed to an American official that "the Communists have an excellent record of looking after children." She concluded:

On the day of the crash of the U.S. C-5A transport plane carrying 243 children and 43 accompanying adults, a South Vietnamese army lieutenant spoke his mind. "It is nice to see you Americans taking home souvenirs of our country as you leave--china elephants and orphans," this officer said. "Too bad some of them broke today, but we have plenty more."³⁰

Desmond Smith, a television director and producer in Canada, visited South Vietnam "on numerous occasions" between 1965 and 1972. He offered this perspective:

It so happens that the war in Vietnam coincides with a declining birth rate in the United States. Particularly among the middle class and well-to-do, there has been a tremendous increase in the demand for children by adoption.³¹

Smith went on to note that there are fashions "even in second-hand babies" and that Vietnamese were currently "in" and the thousands of homeless children from other countries and from the United States as well were unwanted. He concluded in his article, which was written just two weeks after the Babylift, "this traffic in used babies must stop. Let the world press and the U.S. television networks put their reporters on the facts behind this repulsive business rather than on the emotional scenes of frightened children and tearful American adoptive parents."³²

Each of these authors questioned the reasons for the Babylift and the government's involvement. In just as forceful terms, other editorial-

³⁰Ibid., p. 9.

³¹Smith, p. 454.

³²Ibid.

ists in other publications defended it. In its news coverage, Time pointed out each of these concerns, and then added:

Advocates of the babylift insisted that they have the children's best interests in mind. "I disagree with psychiatrists who say this is a means of comforting the nation's guilt," said Presidential Assistant Theodore C. Marrs. "I'm fully convinced it is the basic decency of the American people. When they see a child in trouble, they want to help." For many, that impulse overrode concerns about cultural displacement or political motivation. Said Democratic Congressman Paul Tsongas, a Massachusetts freshman who would like to see 18,000 more orphans evacuated: "Very simplistically, it is better to live in elitism in the United States than to be dead in Viet Nam." And surely life for almost any child in Viet Nam now is more dangerous and uncertain. Daniel Parker, the President's coordinator for international disaster relief, who managed the airlift for the U.S. Government, added that though adoption is not a common practice in Viet Nam, "with the war, the extended family concept simply breaks down," and children must be looked after in other ways.³³

Although the New York Times was one of the few U.S. newspapers to be an early critic of the Babylift, it too considered both sides. In a long article that appeared in the May 9, 1976, issue of the New York Times Magazine, author Tracy Johnston visited with Wende Grant, the American director of Friends For All Children (FFAC), the American agency that assisted Rosemary Taylor with her work on behalf of South Vietnamese orphans:

"What do you say," I asked them, "when people suggest that Communist governments put child welfare high on their list of priorities--that the children whom you rescued from orphanages might have been placed in Vietnamese homes under the new regime?"

"I tell them," says Wende angrily, "that social reform is one thing, but most of our children would be dead by the time it actually happened."³⁴

³³"The Orphans: Saved or Lost?" Time, 21 April 1975, p. 12.

³⁴Tracy Johnston, "Torment Over the Viet Non-Orphans," New York Times Magazine, 9 May 1976, p. 78.

Because, in most instances, newspapers serve a local or regional audience and magazines a national audience, the latter are much more likely to devote space and interest to issues with a national perspective. Such an issue was the Babylift, and it was magazines that devoted considerable attention to it, and particularly the magazines under consideration here. The first of them, MS., didn't go looking for a happy story of an orphan settling into an American family.

(Parents, Ladies Home Journal and McCall's were among those that did.)

Rather, in its September 1975 issue, MS. printed a first-person article written by Grace Paley that is in keeping with the way the magazine describes itself: as a forum where women and men can share information honestly, and as a publisher of in-depth articles.

In her article titled "Other People's Children," Ms. Paley criticized Americans for allowing "our national grief at the thought of Vietnamese children who would be homeless after the American war" to get in the way of finding other solutions to the problem of the orphans. Early in her article she stated:

According to Joseph Reid of the Child Welfare League of America, there were 50,000 homeless children after the Nigerian-Biafran War. The United States (and other countries) thought these children should be offered for adoption. The Nigerians and Biafrans would not permit it. With the help of the International Union for Child Welfare in Geneva, all but 27 of the children were reunited with family or village communities within two years.

Relating that children separated from their parents was commonplace after the world wars and that the Red Cross often reunited parents and children, sometimes after years of separation, she suggested that the Vietnamese themselves would have taken care of the orphaned:

In Vietnam there is a saying: "If Mother is lost, there is Auntie; if Father is lost, there is Uncle." The parentless

child becomes the child of the large household, the village, old aunts who may not even be blood relatives, but who share the natural responsibility of all adults for all the young. This has already happened in North Vietnam, where there is only one "home" for orphans. This is happening now in South Vietnam--grown-up refugees and children in the tens of thousands are returning to their villages in what the Provisional Revolutionary Government called the "Campaign for the Return to the Homelands."

While she strongly criticized the U.S. government for its involvement in the Babylift, Ms. Paley also struck out against the adoption agencies:

. . . Adoption agencies, with contracts begun in professional decorum a year earlier. The agencies panicked when it appeared that the war would end and the subject matter of their contracts, Vietnamese children, would disappear, absorbed into the life of their own country. These agencies, determined to meet those contracts, lost their businesslike cool. . . .

Then, at length, Ms. Paley criticized the organization and execution of the Babylift itself and gave some information on the court case filed in California asking that all adoptions of Babylift children be halted because of the suspicion that some of them weren't orphans at all and had parents in Vietnam.

One statement she made seemed certain to stir up a hornet's nest:

I must say that I don't believe women could have invented the insane idea of transporting these children. I haven't met one woman who is not passionate on the subject--against or in favor--which is quite different from the cynicism and manic energy required for its invention and enactment. Many women truly believed that the American care and ownership of these babies would be the only way their lives would be saved. But most women were wild at the thought of the pain to those other mothers, the grief of the lost children. They felt it was a blow to ALL women, and to their natural political rights. It was a shock to see that world still functioning madly, the world in which the father, the husband, the man-owned state can make legal inventions and take the mother's child.

And she concluded with this:

These children are, after all, the "young shoots" of Vietnam.

Surely all the parents and grandparents, the "aunties" who have suffered and fought for 30 years in horror and continuous loss of dear family, under French oppression and the napalm and bombs of the United States, who have seen the murder of their living earth--surely they will demand to be reunited in years of peace with the hopeful children. They must believe passionately that those small survivors are not to be deprived of the fruits of so many years of revolutionary and patriotic struggle.³⁵

While Ms. Paley pointed out, as other writers did not, the feminist issues involved in the politics of the Babylift, some of her audience wanted to respond to what was perceived as weaknesses in her arguments. From the many letters sent to MS. after this article appeared, the magazine staff selected one, which was reprinted in its entirety, from Suzanne Dosh, the mother of four Vietnamese children, all of whom were totally abandoned, handicapped, and who would have died without the medical treatment they received in the United States. Ms. Dosh prefaced her letter with the statement, "I am appalled by the misinformation and lopsided reporting in 'Other People's Children,' by Grace Paley." Ms. Dosh, who worked for several years in Vietnamese orphanages with the children, continued, "I feel that Grace Paley has failed to perceived the essence and philosophy of intercountry adoptions."

The vast majority of Vietnamese orphans who have been adopted were illegitimate and totally abandoned--with no relatives waiting to retrieve them at the war's end. The death rate for abandoned infants and young children was often as high as 80 percent. Of those who stayed in the orphanages and survived, many were badly undernourished and neglected.

Starvation and emotional deprivation tend to foster weak bodies and dull minds. Were these children to be the hope of the future of Vietnam--its political and social leaders, its professors?

Ms. Dosh then related the stories of each of the four children she

³⁵Grace Paley, "Other People's Children," MS., September 1975, pp. 68-70.

adopted, shocking stories of suffering children destined to die of neglect, illness and handicaps when she found them. Of her children she concluded:

These four children are unique and very special human beings--as are all children. Their stories, however, are not. The children could have come from Timbuktu. Does the name of the country matter when a child is starving, dying, or lonely? She or he is a member of the human family.

In response to Ms. Paley's comment that she doesn't believe "women could have invented the insane idea of transporting these children" and that most women "felt it was a blow to all women and to their natural political rights," Ms. Dosh stated:

. . . The fact is that the decision to care for the orphans, nurse them, feed them, bury them, love them, process adoption papers for eight years, and, in the end, send them on the airlift, was made, on the whole, by women.

Most of these women were not attempting to save the children from communism, offer them Christianity, salve their guilt about the war, steal babies from their mothers' arms, or deprive a country of its future generations. Their reverence for a single human life crossed national, cultural, racial, social, religious, political and economic boundaries. These women gave the children a chance at life--the promise of a mother and father instead of no one; the warmth of a bed instead of hard, wooden slats; the satisfaction of a full stomach instead of a swollen, empty belly; the advantage of essential medical care instead of the threat of death from measles, chicken pox, starvation; the security of knowing one is loved and wanted instead of rejected and lonely, and on and on.

Many of these women risked and lost their lives in order to give life. My children and I are in their debt.³⁶

A review of the women's magazines reveal that letters to the editor are edited tightly and kept short. Space is given to responses on a variety of subjects and at least half the letters praise the magazine for its coverage of a subject. (The September 1982 issue of Redbook, for example, devotes two-thirds of one page to its letters. In that

³⁶"Letters to the Editors," MS., February 1976, p. 10.

space are seven letters addressing three different subjects.) Not only did MS. give almost a full page to this one letter, but the magazine then contacted the author of the article, Grace Paley, to respond to it. She did so, stating that "I do admire Suzanne Dosh's extraordinary generosity--the lifetime reality of it--not a gift of money but years of responsibility and affection." Ms. Paley then made the following three points: 1) The babylift was a "cynical political game," 2) Many of the children were not orphans and 3) "There are other solutions to the problems of homeless children after a war."³⁷

We can feel certain that MS. received replies to that response, but the magazine gave the final word to the author and put the subject to rest, having allowed an eloquent rebuttal to the original article by the "opposing" force--all of which supports its contention that the magazine serves as a "forum" for contemporary issues. As one final footnote to the subject, the magazine printed the name and address of an organization in New York City raising funds to help the Vietnamese people care for their own children in their own country. This author never saw that address appear anywhere else--or even information that the organization existed.

According to its Publisher's Editorial Profile in Standard Rate and Data Service, "Commonweal is a national journal of opinion published by Catholic laymen. It reviews public affairs, literature and the arts, with emphasis on political, social, cultural and religious issues. Contents include editorials, articles, stage and screen reviews, book

³⁷Ibid.

reviews, letters and feature columns."³⁸

Because the magazine is highly respected, conservative, and gears itself to a college educated audience, its tone is often lofty and its writers are intellectual. While it does not present itself in any way as an "official" Catholic publication in the sense of speaking for the church, it is ever mindful of its link to the church and many of its features are religion-oriented. Because of its stature among Catholic laity, it is influential in the Catholic community and looked to by others for determinations of Catholic lay thinking about issues.

Commonweal mentioned the Babylift very soon after its occurrence, carrying a new item in its May 9, 1975, issue in which it revealed that Caritas, the international relief agency headquartered in the Vatican, opposed the "mass expatriation" of South Vietnamese orphans. This opposition, according to the news item, "put Catholic officials in this country on the defensive." American Catholic leaders had "instantly endorsed the baby airlift and the president of the U.S. Catholic Conference had pledged to President Ford the cooperation of all Catholic relief agencies in 'this urgent humanitarian challenge.'"

The news item went on to explain the views of both sides:

Then came the statement of Msgr. Charles Grange, head of Caritas' Asian Department: "We feel the airlift is a deplorable and unjustified mistake which does not solve the problem. It was originated by an unmotivated hysteria which appears to have fortunately faded. Adoption is contrary to the cultural traditions of the Vietnamese people. Orphans are generally placed in the custody of other relatives or taken care of by the community in villages or districts. Adoption by strangers has seldom

³⁸Standard Rate and Data Service (Skokie, Ill.: Standard Rate and Data Service, Inc., May 27, 1982) p. 400.

been considered in the past" . . . In any case, U.S. Catholic policy remained firm in the face of Caritas criticism. The standards employed in placing Vietnamese orphans were "of the highest professional level, with the best interests of the child considered paramount," said Bishop Edward Swanstrom, director of Catholic Relief Services. The placements were being carried out "in complete cooperation with the Roman Catholic bishops of South Vietnam," he added, "and will continue on that basis."³⁹

Just how the editorial staff of Commonweal felt about the Babylift, however, was perhaps made obvious because of their inclusion, directly below this article, of this information about an editorial cartoon that appeared in Britain's Manchester Guardian:

. . . It showed President Ford in football gear dashing down the field with a Vietnamese baby tucked, football-like, into his right arm.

In an accompanying story, the Guardian advised Britons against the American "sentimental frivolity": "British families who want to help should ask themselves whether instead of adopting a doe-eyed Vietnamese child they would be prepared to have a middle-aged South Vietnamese Army major living in their house for the rest of his natural life."

So much for emotionalism in Britain.⁴⁰

Although Commonweal published an eloquent letter to the editor stating that the items in the May 9 "News & Views" column "seems based on generalizations to the point of abstraction, oblivious to realities in the situation of the war orphans of Indochina,"⁴¹ Commonweal proceeded to publish one of the most bitter diatribes to appear in the magazine press in opposition to the Babylift. The author of "The Vietnam Babylift," published in the September 24, 1976, edition, was Susan

³⁹"The Baby Airlift," in "News & Views," Commonweal, 9 May 1975, p. 98.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 98.

⁴¹"Letters to the Editor," Commonweal, 15 August 1975, p. 351.

Abrams, "a freelance writer and peace activist living in Cambridge, Massachusetts."

She wasted no time introducing her subject or letting the reader wonder where she stood on the issue:

The Vietnam Babylift of April 1975 was so cruel, so manipulative a public relations stunt that the past sixteen months have only dulled the shock. In many cases taken from parents pressured into signing adoption releases, destined for the homes of relatives, picked out of orphanages where they had been placed temporarily by parents unable to support them, taken from hospitals or even whisked off the streets, the 2,242 Babylift children are still with us. Yet it has long been evident that the supposed rescue mission more closely resembled a kidnapping and that at least 1,500 of the children are not eligible for adoption.

A lawsuit was filed in U.S. District Court, San Francisco, several weeks after the completion of the Babylift, demanding a thorough investigation by U.S. officials into the backgrounds of each of the children who came to the United States from Vietnam to determine that all of them were indeed orphans and therefore eligible for adoption. The case remained in court over a year before it was dismissed. Ms. Abrams wrote her article and it appeared in Commonweal during the lawsuit. Thus, a number of her comments pertained directly to it.

After her criticism of the agencies that sent the children abroad for adoption, the author struck out at the press:

Most media coverage of the issue has been of the all trees/no forest variety, as journalists focus on individual custody struggles between American couples and Vietnamese refugee mothers who have managed to locate their children. Article after article enumerates the advantages each set of parents seems to offer, with the benefit scale tilting a bit as affluent Americans bring their cars and suburban homes on along with them. "How sad it is," the journalists seem to moan, "that the Babylift should have come to this, that a humanitarian project should end in battles where both sides are so worthy."

Yet the Babylift had to come to this. Supplying a baby market is an ugly business, as are hysterical anti-Communism, some means of assuaging guilt, and, above all, the use of children as political pawns."

She went on to describe the court case and the problems it had run into, heavily criticizing the government, which was the defendant in the case because of its role in the Babylift:

Only a few of the steps in the struggle over the children can and need be described here--enough to hint at the plaintiffs' frustrations, which have been almost unknown, nationwide, to potential supporters. They also make clear the tenacity of a government trying to avoid political embarrassment and of adoption agencies fearful of lawsuits from disappointed American couples, loss of state licenses, and criminal penalties, should any children they placed be returned to Vietnamese parents. . . . Gaining access to the children's files was the first part of the struggle; tracing parents has been the second. The International Red Cross and other agencies skilled at tracing have offered the U.S. government their assistance. They're still waiting, unable to proceed without State Department approval. Lacking (through its own fault) diplomatic relations with Vietnam, the State Department has also tried to explain away its own inaction, citing the supposed indifference and lack of cooperation on the part of the Vietnamese.

Next to be criticized were the adoption agencies:

For their part (with equal cynicism), adoption agency spokespersons also opposed a tracing program on the grounds that it would reopen wounds of guilt-ridden parents or lead to social ostracism for mothers of children of mixed race. They too were unimpressed by evidence that only 20 percent of Babylift children (whom they themselves had brought here) were of mixed race. . . . Stated opposition to tracing programs obviously masks the fear that the origins of the Babylift will be exposed. Why else make no efforts to locate parents among refugees in the U.S. (and defy the claims of refugees who find their children)?

Ms. Abrams then attacked the adoptive parents of adopting the children to give meaning to their own lives and as a means of "assuaging guilt over the war." In her closing remarks, she reported that the United Methodist Church had drawn up a guideline to aid children during war or natural disaster that specifically excluded intercountry adoption "except in certain very restricted cases." Her own conclusion was that:

Operation Babylift was, one discovers with dismay, simply the last (if best publicized) chapter in a rather sordid adoption his-

tory. While the confusion toward war's end made the Babylift an especially sloppy project, the pre-Babylift adoption agency record was nothing to be proud of either. In some cases closely tied to the U.S. Agency for International Development, agencies were ignorant of the Vietnamese practice of extended family care for parentless children, of existing foster-care options, and of the availability of more Vietnamese adults willing to take in a homeless child. . . The agencies supplied a baby market in the U.S. (now dependent on South Korea and other countries) for couples tired of waiting for white infants and unwilling to engage in the "black market" for babies or to adopt an older, handicapped or (ironically) a mixed-race child. There was no incentive for agencies to encourage Vietnamese women to keep their children. In fact, as Tran Tuong Nhu and Tom Miller (who helped file the lawsuit against the U.S. government) write of their experience with adoption agencies in Vietnam, "All the agencies basically functioned on the premise that the Vietnamese were incapable of looking after their own children."⁴²

Unlike MS., which printed just one letter to the editor in reply to the article it published by Grace Paley, and which consumed just one page, Commonweal printed three rather lengthy letters and devoted three full pages to letters, plus another half page to a response to the letters by the author (much as MS. did).

The longest letter, consuming almost two pages, was written by Wende Grant, director of Friends For All Children, one of the agencies mentioned in the article and one of the agencies named in the lawsuit. It was FFAC that worked directly with Rosemary Taylor in assisting orphans in South Vietnam for eight years. The letter from her and her assistant began: "We feel Susan Abrams' article, "The Vietnamese Babylift," is heavily biased, poorly researched, slanderous, and libelous."

While the authors admit they can't in the space allowed write a history of the orphanage system for the ten years prior to the fall of the Saigon regime, they state that writers who visited the orphanages

⁴²Susan Abrams, "The Vietnam Babylift," Commonweal, 24 September 1976, pp. 617-621.

found, with "surprising unanimity of conclusions despite the wide variety of backgrounds, political persuasions, and abilities," that:

Vietnamese orphanages were overcrowded, understaffed (often one adult per 15-50 children), lacking in the most elementary medical care (no soap, no nurses, no measles vaccine, etc.), and without the funds and supplies to adequately feed the children. The results were physical, mental, and emotional deprivation and retardation, malnutrition (often severe), and death rates of over fifty percent.

Despite the Vietnamese tradition that the extended family would care for an orphan, the fact remains that the overall orphanage population continued to increase, despite the death rate, as a result of the high abandonment rate. Indeed, there were children in orphanages who had living, identifiable parents who had expressed their hope or intention of returning for their children when possible. The Catholic Sisters with whom we worked intimately never released such children for adoption. These women remained in Vietnam after the evacuation. With them they kept those children who were known to have any extended family or whose parents had said they would reclaim them.

Beyond those children, however, the fact remains that over one thousand newborn infants were abandoned each month without a shred of identity in maternity clinics, at orphanage gates, on the street, and in garbage dumps. We know about abandonment in Viet Nam from long and close relationships with the nuns who ran the orphanages and our staff who lived there for years and retrieved many of those discarded waifs.

The writers went on to explain their program of assistance in Vietnam, including their attempts to place children in foster care whenever possible, and their efforts to help mothers, wed or unwed, in every way possible to be able to keep their children.

Can Ms. Abrams logically explain why we would kidnap children from parents when we were not able to bring all those children who were legally abandoned and in our care and custody--or why we would kidnap children from parents when we were in the process of returning children to parents?

They refuted the article writer's arguments one by one, and concluded:

We could continue on and comment on every allegation in Ms. Abrams' article. Unfortunately the damage done by a one-sentence allegation often takes at least a paragraph to explain. We categorically dispute every allegation by Ms. Abrams and the various people she interviewed as "experts." We know otherwise. . . .

It is a pity that Ms. Abrams, the plaintiffs in the San Fran-

cisco court case, and numerous others are so glib today with answers as to how it should have been done. We are proud of our work in Vietnam. Our efforts were full of love and sacrifice and always honest. To twist them into the sordid allegations we have listened to the past one and one half years is indeed ugly.⁴³

In addition, Commonweal printed a letter from two nuns who worked in Vietnamese orphanages and who reiterated the sincerity of their efforts to help the children; and a letter from one of the attorneys defending the agencies and the government on allegations that the children who came on the Babylift weren't orphans and that all the adoptions should be stopped. She stated at one point:

Although plaintiffs' attorneys have presented testimony that direct mail communication between Viet Nam and U.S. is open and without difficulty, there has not been since the Babylift, a single request for the return of a child to Viet Nam.

Even though she also criticized Commonweal harshly for printing the article, the magazine included her comment:

Ms. Abrams' sloppy and misleading reporting is, sadly, an example of the willingness of people all along the political spectrum to distort, bury and ignore the truth when it fails to confirm their conventional wisdom. I am afraid she has affected permanently my ability to take seriously what Commonweal has to say about anything.⁴⁴

Interestingly, no letters supporting Ms. Abrams were printed in the magazine, but the author was allowed to reply to these three letters and did so, stating that the agencies had refused to get involved in trying to trace relatives of the children and that the government should have gotten involved in helping the orphans more in Vietnam. She did not respond directly against any of the attacks on her article, but because

⁴³"An Exchange of Views: The Vietnamese Babylift," Commonweal, 19 November 1976, pp. 749-751.

⁴⁴Ibid.

she was given the final word on the subject, it was her parting thought that stayed with the reader who had followed the debate on the subject of the Babylift in Commonweal: "It is obviously quite possible for some people to act in a sincere and conscientious way while carrying out something that was dead wrong to begin with (and for others then to find suitable rationalizations for their actions.)"⁴⁵

Of the news magazines, no one paid more attention to the orphans of South Vietnam than did Newsweek. As stated in Chapter I, in 1973 the magazine carried a major article called "Vietnam's War-Torn Children" in which a hard look was taken at what was happening to the children, whether in intact families or injured in any way by the war. The article was full of tragic stories of emotionally and physically scarred children and of the children in general the author, Loren Jenkins, stated:

Hope is a rare quality in today's Vietnam--almost as rare as a child who has not been scarrred, one way or another, by the war. Unlike conventional military conflicts, the Vietnamese war has no fixed boundaries or front lines, and it made little distinction between military and civilian, adult and child. Although the pain the war inflicted upon the children is impossible to calculate statistically, the estimates are immense.⁴⁶

Interestingly, along with that article Newsweek included a half page headed "How to Adopt a Vietnamese." The information given, however, was so sketchy that anyone reading it would not have known how to insitgate the procedure, although the names of the three licensed agencies in the United States--but not their addresses or phone numbers--were given. Another article included in the issue told of an American couple's quest to adopt an orphan, a story that would once again discourage all but the

⁴⁵Ibid

⁴⁶Jenkins, p. 52.

most stalwart from trying to do the same thing. Because of the descriptions given by the author of Vietnamese orphanages, however, the article probably increased the flow of private relief from generous Americans appalled by what they read.

When the Babylift began, Newsweek reporters were at hand and the magazine told in minute detail of the negotiations to find a plane to get the first orphans out, the crash of the C-5A, which Newsweek ran a picture of, and the subsequent government-sponsored flights carrying out the two thousand-plus children. Two weeks in a row, April 14, 1975, and April 21, 1975, Newsweek included extensive coverage of the Babylift, chronicling the arrivals of the children and their meetings with their new families, but also relating the opposition being voiced by dissidents, interfacing, as opinion articles rarely do, both points of view:

Despite the show of support, the airlift quickly became enmeshed in a tangle of psychological complexities, cultural differences and political problems. In Saigon, opposition political and religious leaders circulated a copy of a letter in which Deputy Premier Phan Quang Dan urged former Premier Tran Thien Khiem and the government to expedite the passage of the orphans. A mass exodus, the letter predicted, would be given wide coverage in the American press, radio and TV networks, and would create a groundswell of sympathy that would ultimately help the regime.

Dan denied that he had been playing politics with children's lives. "These children would die if they were not allowed to go," he said. "They are too fragile, too young and too helpless to go without care--and we simply cannot look after them." He also announced that Saigon was ready to put 6,000 more orphans up for adoption abroad. "All we ask now," he said, "is that we have proof that a child has lost both parents or that the living parent is willing to release him."⁴⁷

As a news and opinion magazine, Newsweek has the advantage of offer-

⁴⁷"The Orphans: Hard Passage," Newsweek, 21 April 1975, p. 40.

ing the reader hard facts as well as interpretation. In April of 1975 two of Newsweek's distinguished columnists were Meg Greenfield and Shana Alexander. (Ms. Greenfield is still a Newsweek columnist, Ms. Alexander is not.) In the April 28 issue, both columnists addressed the topic of the Babylift, but they expressed very different ideas on it.

In her column titled "A Sentimental Binge," Ms. Alexander expressed the doubts troubling many people about the "orphans":

Operation Baby Lift is a perfectly terrible idea for all sorts of reasons. Nobody really knows how the children actually were rounded up, how many were truly orphans, how many abandoned, how many lost, how many fathered by Americans, how many ill, how ill they were, how many wanted to come, how many had suitable homes awaiting them, how or whether the legal problems had been overcome. Nobody even knew how many children there were.

She then made the point that:

The baby lift may not turn out to have been a humanitarian act, but it certainly was a political one. On the one side, it seemed an attempt to snatch honor from the jaws of dishonor. To the degree that this was conscious government policy, it is abhorrent. One can only recoil at the cynicism and stupidity of our ambassador in Saigon who allegedly said he hoped the baby lift would "help create a shift in American public opinion in favor" of South Vietnam. Cynics on the other side, cynical doves if you will, called Operation Baby Lift one last rape of Asia before going home, and compared the children to export souvenirs or war mementos like porcelain elephants.

Without considering what could have happened to children left un-caref for in the interim of switching governments after the North's takeover, Ms. Alexander went on:

In the panic to get the children out, no one seemed to ask what they were being rescued from. If we know one thing about the government founded by Ho Chi Minh, it is that its social services are excellent: good health care, day care and educational programs abound, especially for the poor.

At the end of her essay, she offered an explanation for the 'why'

of the Babylift and a final, devastating conclusion as to what it all meant:

It is normal and human to want to put a good face on disaster. In that sense, the baby lift was more emotional than rational, reflecting the same need to do something that moves firemen to rescue a kitten from a burning building. The baby lift was chiefly a symbolic act, designed less to assist the helpless children than to ease our own sense of helplessness in a time of horror. At such moments, some atavistic and irrational dread of the massacre of the innocents arises from a primitive level of being. We respond by filling the sky with orphans.

Perhaps every war gets the epitaph it deserves. A skyful of babies--what a symbol for the end of this war! We cannot and will never wave a white flag. Instead we fill the skies with innocents, tiny human peace symbols borne aloft in the same planes that flew the bombs that made them orphans in the first place.⁴⁸

Almost as if engaging in a point-counterpoint with Shana Alexander, Pulitzer prize-winning columnist Meg Greenfield, in her column titled "Tran Van Jones," suggested that political reasons and ideologies should have been set aside in the quest to help children in need:

That there are other children needing aid or that there are "root causes" to be addressed do not seem to me adequate reasons for failing to help a single child. Those objections concerning exploitation of the children I would stipulate as true, inevitable and ultimately irrelevant. For on the basis of my observation of the political and bureaucratic forces at work in my own community, I have come to regard it as a given that until such children are finally settled they are continually at risk, that the warring agents and exploiters of their rescue can pretty well be counted on to enhance their misery for a time. . . nothing suggests to me that the truly lost and alone among these children would have been spared the agonies adults are so good at generating had they remained in unreconstructed postwar Vietnam. I am talking of time here, not politics or ideology: I do not for a moment believe the presumptive inheritors of South Vietnam mean harm to their small children. I do believe that in the wake of the general bloodshed and displacement, these particular children would have small claim on the resources of recovery and small chance of finding personal havens such as they have now

⁴⁸Shana Alexander, "A Sentimental Binge," Newsweek, 21 April 1975, p. 88.

found in the period of time that matters.

Her conclusion was to assume that people acted on the best motive, concerned first and foremost about the welfare of the children. In her conclusion, she put the issue in perspective this way:

In the best of worlds or even a better one, none of this would have happened. But it did. Why should people be made to feel ashamed of a necessarily sad and imperfect effort to rescue a lonely child? It's not as if we had a shortage of things to be ashamed of.⁴⁹

Like the other magazines under consideration here, Saturday Review paid close attention to the Babylift and allowed both pro and anti viewpoints to be heard. Because the editor, Norman Cousins, lent his editorial support to it, the article that appeared in the May 1, 1976 issue written by Betty Jean Lifton reporting on the court case in which the legality of the Babylift came under attack in a lawsuit against the government (the case referred to several times earlier in this paper) is something of a surprise. In a tone sometimes reminiscent of Grace Paley's article in MS., and Susan Abrams' article in Commonweal, Ms. Lifton takes to task the U.S. government and the agencies involved in the Babylift, charging that some of the children--perhaps several hundred--were not orphans at all and were gathered up at the end of the war in questionable ways and should now be sent back to Vietnam. She introduced her premise this way:

History moves quickly, today's hysterical headlines becoming tomorrow's stale news. It has been a year now since the controversial Operation Babylift brought more than 2,000 Vietnamese children to American adoptive homes--and the glow of either virtue or outrage to American hearts. For those who favored the program, something noble has finally come out of this ignoble war; for those opposed, re-

⁴⁹Greenfield, p. 31.

moving children from their homeland and their heritage was the most ignoble act of all.

Noting that the presiding judge was a Nixon appointee--allowing her reading audience to immediately find him suspect--Ms. Lifton made it clear as to how she felt about the lawsuit's progress:

In the federal courthouse in San Francisco, just down the corridor from where the Patty Hearst trial has come and gone with its own brand of hysteria, the case has been proceeding at a snail's pace in front of Judge Spencer Williams--in spite of the plaintiffs' plea that the best interests of the children would be served by fast and decisive action. . . It would take a King Solomon to unravel the bureaucratic red tape that has accumulated. The seemingly simple operation of sending possibly a few hundred non-orphans back to their families has become entangled in the emotional snarl of adoption politics in this country. Judge Williams has already declared that he is not running an adoption court, and that he does not want to get involved with an international situation over which he does not have jurisdiction. No wonder he has allowed months to pass between hearings, and in mid-February took a vacation from the briefs, counter-briefs, appeals, affidavits, and telegrams from all sides.

Ms. Lifton continued by considering the plaintiffs', the government's, and the adoption agencies' positions, then concluded that the real losers are the natural parents of the children as well as the children themselves:

Perhaps the real question is, how can parents in Vietnam possibly have the means to appeal in our state courts? Also, are we not confusing the rights of Vietnamese mothers who have become separated from their children with the legal controversy over the rights of unwed mothers here who have given up their children and changed their minds before the adoption is finalized? Can the best interests of the Babylift children be served by denying them the right to return to living parents--especially to those mothers who are in this country pleading for them?

Until these questions are answered by a court of law or by an international commission acting officially on behalf of the two countries involved, the children remain the hapless victims of the conflicts, as surely as they were of the war itself.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Betty Jean Lifton, "Orphans in Limbo," Saturday Review, 1 May 1976

The article of course drew letters, including one from one of the lawyers representing the pre-adoptive ("pre" in the sense that the government blocked final adoption of all Babylift children until the court case was settled) parents, which took Ms. Lifton to task on several points and in part stated:

The fact of the matter is that after more than a year of litigation and testimony offered by the attorneys seeking the deportation orders or free communication between this country and Vietnam, not one parent or close relative of an Orphanlift child has expressed desire for the return of a child to Vietnam. Vietnam itself has shown no official interest in the return of the children. Indeed, for the past year Denmark has been unsuccessful in its attempts to repatriate the approximately 700 Montagnard children evacuated as part of the Orphanlift. . . .⁵¹

As with the other magazines under consideration here, Saturday Review asked the author to respond to this letter and she did so, stating that the U.S. government should have "agreed immediately to work with the international agencies that were willing to help determine whether these children had living families who wanted them."⁵²

Although newspaper editorials were plentiful at the time of the Babylift, few of which were anything but totally supportive of it, Saturday Review ran one of the few magazine editorials to appear on the subject. Written by editor Norman Cousins, he drew a parallel between all the arguments for why the Babylift children will never be at home in their new country and the effort to bring a group of disfigured girls, victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, to the United States for plastic surgery. He reminded his readers that the girls stayed for a

⁵¹"Letters from Readers," Saturday Review, 7 October 1976, p. 5.

⁵²Ibid.

year with American families and that the experiment, deemed successful by everyone involved, proved that "love and warmth can negate cultural shock. The experience of the Hiroshima girls in living with their American families enabled them to bridge gaps between the two societies." Arguing, as did Ms. Greenfield, from a humanitarian point of view, Cousins offered an eloquent summation in defense of the Baby-lift:

It is being asserted that the children are being exploited for propagandist purposes, and that the historic sense of American sympathy for war victims, especially children, is being stirred up as a means of getting the United States involved in Vietnam all over again.

We recognize that some people in government are not unmindful of the mileage that mercy has to offer. But it is absurd to set aside the dictates of conscience just because we are afraid of being politically manipulated.

There is also the argument that Vietnam does not have a monopoly on orphans in the world, and that millions of children in the Sahara, in India, in Bangladesh, and in South America will more than satisfy the craving of Americans to provide tender loving care. To the extent that this argument has validity, it should not cause Americans to turn away from Vietnamese children but should cause them to be equally open wherever human need exists.

Expertise always has its limitations, but never more so than when it tries to diagram human response or find reasons for cur-tailing compassion.⁵³

Maybe, finally, that's what the whole issue is about. Expertise has its limitations. We'll never really know if the government became involved in the Baby-lift because it sensed a way to counteract the American public's demoralization over the tragic end to the Vietnam War, or if it truly acted out of humanitarian reasons.

The questions raised by the Baby-lift can never be fully answered, nor can the lingering doubts be put to rest. But that the issues were considered at all and in such detail is in part due to the perse-

⁵³Norman Cousins, "Let the Children Come," Saturday Review, 17 May 1975, p. 4.

verance of elements of the American magazine press. They were free to challenge and accuse the American government with no fear of reprisal. The four magazines considered here were in the forefront, never allowing the controversy to die quietly, determining that each and every issue was examined thoroughly, with opportunity for rebuttal from readers. They exemplified the very best of what the free press is all about, taking their responsibility seriously and thoughtfully.

CHAPTER III

BRINGING THE WAR TO THE PEOPLE

The controversy surrounding Operation Babylift and the adoption of Vietnamese children by Americans isn't over. Though the issues no longer draw much attention from the public, every so often they re-surface. Does a government have the right to expatriate 2,000 children from another country? Should the government have gotten involved at all in the Babylift? Were all the children orphans?

In the December 1978 issue of Psychology Today, an article titled "The Last Victims of Vietnam" explored the ongoing problems faced by the adopted Vietnamese children and their adoptive families. The article also reminded its readers of President Ford's statement made at the time of the Babylift that "This is the least we can do, and we will do much, much more."

As the airlift babies prepare to spend their fourth holiday season in America, Ford's promise has been forgotten and there is precious little attention being paid to their problems. Federal agencies have not only failed to offer information or financial help to the adoptive families, but have withdrawn support as well. Senators and congressmen, aware of their constituents' wish to forget the Vietnam years, have been unwilling to be identified with the issue. The children have become a symbol of an ill-conceived, hasty enterprise, embarrassing to the Left because of its imperialistic overtone, and to the Right because of its mismanagement.

The article went on to quote an adoptive mother who said:

"People who were authorities, who stood behind adoption, suddenly switched sides a few days after the babylift," said Pam Larsen, an airlift mother. "But those of us who had made a commitment were not in a position to switch. Parents couldn't say, 'You're right. I'm going right down to buy a plane ticket and

send my black-Vietnamese postpolio child back to the culture of an orphanage."

And it concluded:

After spending \$2.6 million to finance the massive babylift, the government has written off the whole episode as just another tactical error of the Vietnam war.⁵⁴

In this fall of 1982, Americans are again thinking of war orphans. They are in Lebanon, El Salvador and Nicaragua, among other places. The press doesn't talk much about the orphans in those countries--at least not in articles the author is aware of. But the press is talking about Vietnamese children again, for another airlift of sorts is currently underway with the daily arrival of Amerasian--half Vietnamese and half American--children coming to begin lives with their American fathers. So the old issues are resurfacing. Is this in the best interests of the children? Is it a public relations ploy by the government? Why has it taken so long to instigate it? Once again we watch on television tearful scenes of airport reunions between--this time--American fathers and their half-Vietnamese children whom they haven't seen in as long as ten years. As it was with the Babylift seven years ago, television commentators and newspaper reporters aren't asking the tough questions. Their focus is the "happy" children and their "thrilled"⁵⁵ parents. It will once again be certain magazines that debate and discuss, accuse and cajole. And for that we are lucky, we Americans who tend to take freedom of the press so much for granted. Yet, in glancing at the role of the press in the Vietnam War, one wonders if more could

⁵⁴Edward Zigler and Karen Anderson, "The Last Victims of Vietnam," Psychology Today, December 1978, pp. 24 & 30.

⁵⁵"Children Travel to New Homes," Lawrence Journal-World, 3 October 1982, p. 11D.

have been expected and if the press could have somehow changed the course of events by keeping the public better informed about what was happening in Vietnam. Nothing can be changed now, yet in retrospect, if we can see the errors of Vietnam, perhaps we (journalists) can be certain that they aren't repeated in another war.

The war was reported in several ways. Reporters were there to issue eye-witness reports, travelling with the troops, sharing their fox holes, observing history in the making. Others went on fact-finding trips, avoiding the front lines as they searched out specific issues and key people. Journalists back home assimilated the news coming from the war fronts, along with the mood of the public and the motions of the government, and offered interpretations. Many, if not most of the home journalists had never been in a war zone--or in a Vietnamese orphanage.

According to General William C. Westmoreland, Vietnam field commander from 1964 to 1968 and Army Chief of Staff from 1968 to 1972, the Vietnam War posed a special problem for the press. Noting that the general tone of press and television coverage was critical, Westmoreland commented in his post-Vietnam book, A Soldier Reports, that American journalists lacked "all but most limited access to the enemy," and "often focused on the death and destruction inevitably produced by American and South Vietnamese operations. I sometimes wondered that if the same uncensored comment had been coming out of occupied France during the years 1942-44 when the Allies were bombing French railroads in preparation for the invasion of Normandy, whether Allied public opinion would have supported

Allied armies going ashore on D-Day."⁵⁶

Westmoreland was quick to acknowledge the problems faced by the press, but he also acknowledged the problems with the press:

One problem was the youth and inexperience of many correspondents. Having little or no knowledge of military history, having seen no other war, and, like most in the military, having no ability in the Vietnamese language, some reporters were ill-equipped for their assignments. Short deadlines contributed to inaccuracy and some free-lance writers depended upon sensationalism to sell their wares. In general, journalism appears to nurture the pontifical judgment. I was on occasion reminded of General Eisenhower's remark to a publisher who had told him at length what was wrong with the conduct of World War II. "I thought it was only in the world's oldest profession," General Eisenhower said, "that amateurs think they can do better than professionals."⁵⁷

Westmoreland understood the nature of the problem with the press:

. . . because reporters changed so frequently, with even the most dedicated rarely staying beyond a year or 18 months, providing the press with background and perspective was like trying to paint a moving train.⁵⁸

Journalists themselves recognized this, as Thomas Powers explained in Commonweal:

The war in Vietnam has always raised the most difficult sorts of questions for journalists. The problem is not that journalists are by nature morally insensitive or politically indifferent but that they must write before they have had time to think. The ideal of objectivity is not based on the premise that all positions are of equal value, but on the practical fact that life is complicated and time short. . . The truth is that most news stories demand to be reported in simple declarative sentences. . . There is time for nothing else.⁵⁹

⁵⁶William C. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1976) pp. 420-21.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 419.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Thomas Powers, "Reporting on Indochina," Commonweal, 9 May 1975, p. 112.

Even with the limitations, however, the influence of the press in the Vietnam War cannot be underestimated. As James Reston said:

Maybe the historians will agree that the reporters and the cameras were decisive in the end. They brought the issues of the war to the people, before the Congress and the courts, and forced the withdrawal of American power from Vietnam.⁶⁰

Had the press focused this influence more strongly on such issues as the orphaned children of Vietnam, however, perhaps American aid would have been offered to orphanages much sooner. It's even conceivable, that with good care available to the children there, a better foster program could have been established inside the country and the Babylift would never have been necessary.

Once it happened, however, some magazines refused to jump on the bandwagon with the television and newspaper press. The issues raised in the magazines about the Babylift were painful and revealing. Because of their probe, we can rest assured that they will continue to ponder, confront and challenge the timely issues of the day.

That the magazine press does so and that newspapers and the media can--and frequently does--do so is one of the strengths of American society. "Three hostile newspapers," Napoleon once wrote, "are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets." And author James Jones wrote during the Vietnam War, "I know of no other nation that would allow its press to come out in full attack against the good faith of its government. Certainly not North Vietnam. And not South Vietnam."⁶¹

⁶⁰James Reston, "The End of the Tunnel," New York Times, 30 April 1975, p. 33.

⁶¹Jones, p. 5.

The Babylift and the adoptions of Vietnamese children are just two issues taken to task by the magazine press in this country. the debate on these issues isn't over. Healthfully and constructively, through articles, editorials and letters to the editors, we will continue to examine our most perplexing moral dilemmas. That this can happen in the American magazine press is a tribute to our society and to responsible journalism.

AFTERWORD

Two and one half years ago when I began to research the topic of the Babylift and the adoption of Vietnamese orphans by Americans, I knew opposition existed to both, but I didn't know why.

At the time of the Babylift in 1975, the American public seemingly welcomed the Babylift children with open arms. The stories in the newspapers and on television and radio were supportive, sometimes to the extreme.

In the years since, I've continued to be curious as to why highly respected magazines printed articles and editorials critical of the Babylift, which was hailed by the popular press as a "fine humanitarian gesture" that greatly moved the American public. My curiosity prompted my interest in exploring its coverage in the magazine press.

As I gathered the articles and books that comprise my research for this study, I began to understand the "other side" for the first time. The issues of the government involvement, the actual handling of the Babylift, and the larger issues of America's right to both sponsor the airlift and also to allow the adoptions of Vietnamese children are very much two-sided. I have been thoroughly educated about each.

My hope for this study is that, above all, the role of the magazine press in raising these issues is made clear. I hope it is also clear that for every argument attending these issues, there is a counter-argument. The issues are fascinating, complex, and neither side is more right than the other.

My goal has been to operate as a responsible journalist in reporting

the background of the issues as well as the magazine coverage of them. "Responsible" means unbiased. I believe I have accomplished that. For, while I am the adoptive mother of one of the Babylift children, I am not unmindful of all the arguments against intracountry adoption, or the Babylift itself. Intellectually I understand. Emotionally I know how precious my daughter is to me and how empty my life would be without her. I also know that her survival--for health reasons--was contingent on leaving Saigon when she did.

For her sake as well as mine, I will be eternally grateful to the American government for getting involved, and to Friends For All Children, the agency that made her adoption possible.

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