

Refugees and the Roadmap

On April 9, 1991, the United States presented Hanoi with a “Roadmap to US-SRV Normalization.”¹ The George H. W. Bush administration issued the Roadmap to provide a “more systematic and concrete . . . pathway to full normalization . . . within a reasonably short time.”² In many ways, the plan signaled a continuation in policy. Although the document’s specific contents remained classified until 1999, the American public and press knew that the Roadmap required the SRV to satisfy the two demands that US policy makers publicized for over a decade: facilitate a full accounting of missing American servicemen and withdrawal from Cambodia, a condition US officials expanded to include not only the physical removal of Vietnamese troops but also a political solution to the question of who would fill the power vacuum left in Hanoi’s wake. While these two concerns dominated public discussions and featured prominently in official negotiations, migration programs for South Vietnamese, especially negotiations surrounding the continued incarceration of reeducation camp detainees, remained vital to the process of US-Vietnamese normalization. US policy makers included reeducation camp prisoners in the Roadmap, and Washington and Hanoi collaborated closely on migration programs.

The Roadmap also publicly signaled that US officials expected to resume official negotiations on the status of bilateral economic and diplomatic ties, negotiations which had been suspended since 1978. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and a political settlement that removed SRV troops from Cambodia in October 1991 created an atmosphere of flexibility and opportunity that had been absent for decades. These shifts had major consequences for US-SRV relations. As the last decade of the

twentieth century opened, collaboration on both humanitarian programs *and* negotiations on official bilateral relations progressed in noticeable ways. These were not separate discussions. Throughout the 1980s, cooperation on humanitarian issues had been normalizing US-SRV relations, even as formal talks remained suspended. Once official negotiations reconvened, however, humanitarian issues became even further ensconced in the normalization process because American officials earmarked resolving humanitarian concerns as a precondition to more formal ties.

Far from the general, if fragile, consensus that had characterized the American approach to Vietnam during much of the 1980s, a fluid, contentious atmosphere arose as the decade came to a close. A sizable conglomerate of US business interests, for example, seized on the changing times to argue that the SRV constituted an untapped market – possibly even the next “Asian tiger” – with a preexisting appetite for American goods.³ Powerful American corporations, therefore, lobbied intensively against the embargo and criticized the lack of formal ties. Business interests clashed with the POW/MIA lobby, led by the League, which insisted that full accounting should be the only barometer for official relations.⁴

At the same time, Indochina-focused NGOs entered the national conversation about US-Vietnamese normalization with increasing assertiveness. While the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA) and the Aurora Foundation continued to be the most influential NGOs with regard to reeducation camp prisoners, elite tier resettlement agencies with government contracts and well-funded think tanks with close government ties held a series of prominent conferences and symposia on US-SRV relations. Once the question became when, and not if, Washington and Hanoi would resume formal ties, these powerful actors who had a stake in the timing and implementation of official relations became more vocal. While I will occasionally mention these groups as examples of ongoing nongovernmental advocacy, much more work needs to be done to interrogate the vast network of interested parties in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Heated debates among American policy makers and publics in a swiftly changing geopolitical atmosphere poignantly echoed the 1975–1980 period. The similarities did not end there. While the Indochinese diaspora continued throughout the 1980s, the rate of departures, especially the number of Vietnamese fleeing their country by boat, soared at the end of the decade. The upswing in the number of oceanic migrants triggered debates about their legal status, the sanctity of first asylum, and the principle of

nonrefoulment – the legal prohibition against returning refugees to the country from which they fled. As it had in the 1970s, the international community forged a multilateral response to a dramatic increase in the number of oceanic migrants. The resulting program, the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA), however, signaled an important shift in international norms. Screening individuals to determine their legal standing, rather than awarding all “boat people” blanket refugee status, became the core premise of the CPA.⁵ This new approach reflected mounting compassion fatigue and the accusation that those fleeing Vietnam were not bona fide refugees but economic migrants who did not deserve the rights, protections, or resources that international law afforded refugees.⁶ For “screened out” migrants – that is, for those who did not individually qualify for refugee status – the CPA prescribed voluntary repatriation, or return to Vietnam, as a first option, and forced repatriation as a last resort. The UNHCR’s support for individual screening and willingness to endorse repatriation reflected broader shifts occurring on a global scale.⁷

As international refugee norms changed, so did US domestic approaches. Because many individuals and institutions were involved in formulating and implementing US policy, however, changes in American practices occurred unevenly and were hotly contested. Migration scholar Maria Cristina Garcia characterizes the years between 1989 and 1992 as a “transitional period” when the fundamental assumptions that undergird US policy shifted in foundational ways. US officials and the American public “questioned the logic of assuming that those fleeing communism had more legitimate needs for protection than others” and “tensions between Congress and the White House ... became particularly apparent” as the two centers of power clashed over a number of groups seeking refuge or asylum in the US, including Soviet refuseniks, Chinese students in the wake of the Tiananmen crisis, and Haitian and Cuban boat people.⁸ Because the US government had provided so much of the UNHCR’s funding, these disagreements reverberated far beyond American shores and reflected a larger moment of transformation in global approaches.

They also had profound implications for the US response to the ongoing Indochinese diaspora. Although Washington signed the CPA, American officials had opposed the idea of repatriating migrants to Vietnam since 1975 on the grounds that human rights violations made such a move morally untenable and unlawful. US officials were able to briefly sustain these mutually exclusive positions – supporting the CPA but condemning repatriation – but by the mid-1990s, the contradiction became too stark to ignore. As official talks on the status of formal

relations between Washington and Hanoi suddenly seemed imminent, the consensus on humanitarian programs dissolved, a process which accelerated rapidly throughout the early 1990s.

Although increasingly divided, members of Congress remained crucial actors in the normalization process and in broader discussions about American foreign relations. As historian Christopher Maynard has noted, the “formulation of foreign policy in the Bush administration centered on the National Security Council,” which focused the preponderant amount of its attention on the collapse of the Soviet Union, democratization in Eastern Europe, reunification in Germany, the termination of the Warsaw Pact, and events in the Persian Gulf.⁹ It is this prioritization that led Robert D. Schulzinger to argue that the Bush administration remained “preoccupied” with events in Europe, and “Asian issues generally, and Southeast Asia in particular, receded.”¹⁰ When one takes into account migration issues and congressional foreign policy initiatives, however, this picture changes dramatically. As they had done for more than a decade, legislators played a definitive role in crafting US policy toward SRV, acting both as an accelerant and a break to closer ties. Although the White House intervened in key moments, one must look to Capitol Hill to appreciate the full expanse of steps the United States and SRV took toward normalization during the Bush years.

The majority of these steps included responding to and facilitating the emigration of South Vietnamese from Vietnam to the United States. In particular, as the Cold War deescalated, Washington and Hanoi reached major milestones with regard to reeducation camp detainees. The two governments signed a bilateral accord that provided for the detainees’ migration, the Humanitarian Operation (HO) Agreement in 1989, former reeducation camp prisoners and their close family members began arriving in the United States under the new program in 1990, and Hanoi released the last detainees in 1992. The FVPPA and the Aurora Foundation continued to assemble information and provide momentum for these policy advancements. Thanks in part to this ongoing advocacy, migration issues facilitated deepening US-Vietnamese ties, even as the governments cautiously restarted thorny conversations about official bilateral relations.

FORMULATING THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF ACTION AND HUMANITARIAN OPERATION

By 1989, the FVPPA cemented its place as a key source of transnational advocacy and information on Vietnamese reeducation camp detainees.

The organization's stature belied its modest resources. The Association had to pay for its only Xerox machine on installments, and Tho and her fellow activists all held day jobs to pay their bills.¹¹ The FVPPA operated out of Tho's home in Falls Church, VA for the entirety of its existence, and community members dubbed her personal residence "the refugee center."¹² During the heyday of the Association's activities, Tho recalled working feverishly on FVPPA business over her lunch break, asking friends to drive her to Capitol Hill because she did not own a car, and staying up all hours of the night to respond to incoming calls and mail, which originated from all corners of the Vietnamese diaspora and from some of the most powerful offices in Washington, DC.¹³ It is clear that the growing Vietnamese American community recognized the FVPPA's prominence. When Tho traveled to California in January 1989, for instance, she held meetings with various Vietnamese American organizations and gave speeches explaining the current status of US reeducation camp policy to more than two hundred people.¹⁴

In May, the FVPPA joined with five other Vietnamese American organizations to form the National Congress of Vietnamese in America. The goal of this organization was to "prepare to receive Vietnamese reeducation centers detainees who," they hoped, would be "accepted for resettlement by the United States Government in the near future."¹⁵ It is noteworthy that this umbrella organization appointed Tho as the head of the Subcommittee in charge of Congressional and Governmental Liaison.¹⁶ Given the FVPPA's extensive government contacts, Tho was a logical choice; yet, the fact that all the other organizational heads – men raised in a highly patriarchal and deferential Vietnamese culture – appointed Tho to that position emphasizes the extent to which leaders in the Vietnamese American community found the FVPPA too important to ignore.

The FVPPA's network extended far beyond other Vietnamese American organizations; the Association also collaborated with some of the most well-known human rights and humanitarian NGOs of the era. While Amnesty International (AI) built its reputation on the quality of its global information network, AI's London headquarters regularly wrote to the FVPPA when it needed information on Vietnamese reeducation detainees.¹⁷ The Red Cross and other NGOs also came to the FVPPA when they needed information on reeducation camp prisoners or the Vietnamese American community.¹⁸ Vietnamese Americans, human rights and humanitarian NGOs, and the US government all recognized the FVPPA's importance.

So did Hanoi. In March 1989 the SRV Ambassador to the United Nations “requested to set up a meeting” with Tho “to discuss issues and concerns we have regarding the political prisoners.”¹⁹ The always tactful Tho wrote to her good friend, Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Refugee Programs Robert Funseth, to “touch base” before she met with the Ambassador to ensure they presented “a united” front.²⁰ Tho and a few of her associates met with Funseth on April 8 and then with the SRV Ambassador in New York less than a week later.²¹ That the SRV wished to meet with the FVPPA’s leadership – even as formal US-Vietnamese negotiations on reeducation camp prisoners remained suspended – demonstrates that Hanoi recognized the Association’s importance to the American stance on the issue. This is certainly the takeaway that Tho took from the invitation. “This meeting was significant because [the] Ambassador respect[ed] our voice and our standing as an organization working with [the] US government on behalf of political prisoners,” she recalled decades later, adding the meeting lasted two hours “so we talk[ed] about everything,” most prominently, the pains of family separation. The FVPPA’s key message to the SRV delegation was “fourteen years was enough.”²² Although Tho never accompanied Funseth on his trips to Geneva and Hanoi like the League’s Ann Mills Griffiths, this meeting at the UN suggests Hanoi saw the parity between the organizations and tried to address them both.

As the FVPPA expanded its influence, the ongoing exodus of oceanic migrants surged dramatically. Over 96,000 individuals reached the shores of first asylum in the first six months of 1989. The ASEAN states, who had acted as nations of first asylum for fourteen years, began to implement drastic measures, clamored for another international conference, and called on the SRV to expand the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) to provide an alternative exit route for migrants.²³ When an international conference was not immediately forthcoming, the nations of first asylum and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began meeting on their own and drafted what would eventually become the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA).

Screening for refugee status, rather than a blanket application of that status for all oceanic migrants originating from Vietnam, became a core component of the CPA. The signatory nations agreed that this momentous change would go into effect on March 14, 1989.²⁴ Those who arrived before the cutoff date would automatically receive refugee status; the nations of first asylum would individually screen those who arrived thereafter to determine their standing. A combination of compassion fatigue,

limited resources, and a surge in numbers thus reinvigorated old debates about who deserved refugee status and who got to decide.

These debates occurred not only among Southeast Asian states of first asylum but also within the American bureaucracy. After decades of appropriating large budgets for refugee resettlement, the thawing of the Cold War invited a larger rethinking of previous practices, a process that was accelerated by a variety of factors. These included increasing scrutiny and criticism from domestic political actors, congressional activism aimed to reduce refugee admissions, and a growing number of asylum petitions filed from migrants on US territory.²⁵ In this context, Garcia explains, “the days of granting automatic refugee or parolee status,” especially to large groups, “were coming to an end” in favor of a “case-by-case” approach.²⁶

Nearly fifteen years after the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh, the ASEAN argued that the majority of the Indochinese who reached their shores were economic migrants rather than bona fide refugees. Because the ASEAN were not signatories to the international conventions regarding refugees, they were not legally obliged to honor the principle of nonrefoulement. The CPA draft thus noted with regard to rejected applicants that “every effort will be made to encourage the voluntary return of such persons,” but the implication was clear – while voluntary repatriation would be preferred, ASEAN nations were not opposed to forced repatriation.²⁷ It is in this context that seventy nations, including the United States, agreed to attend a second Geneva Conference on Indochinese Refugees scheduled for June 1989.

Reeducation camp prisoners occupied an important place in the American approach to the renewed migrant surge. Indeed, the exodus of oceanic migrants and the plight of reeducation detainees had always been linked. Prior to a US-SRV bilateral agreement on the issue, Hanoi refused to allow the vast majority of former reeducation camp detainees to emigrate through the ODP, despite official assurances otherwise. Only 600 former reeducation detainees and 2,400 of their family members had resettled in the United States through the ODP by June 1989.²⁸ As Hanoi released tens of thousands of detainees in the late 1980s, these individuals faced anew the challenge of how to pursue a better life. They faced unenviable choices. They could consign themselves to life in Vietnam, enduring the discrimination that often followed former detainees and their families, they could wait in the hope that Hanoi would eventually allow them to emigrate abroad legally; or, they could leave unlawfully under the dangerous conditions that always accompanied

oceanic flight or overland migration.²⁹ Many former reeducation camp prisoners chose the latter option, entangling Hanoi's reeducation camp policy with the ODP and oceanic flight in American policy makers' minds.

Ginetta Sagan and Khuc Minh Tho went to great lengths to ensure that US officials were aware of these connections. Sagan, for example, testified before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus about what she argued could only be understood as Hanoi's continued violation of its citizens' human rights.³⁰ Tho wrote to Funseth in late May, before his departure to Geneva, to ask that he "put pressure on the SRV to resume technical talks regarding the movement of ex-reeducation camp detainees, and the release of the rest of the political prisoners."³¹ She also suggested that previous incarceration in a reeducation camp or status as the child of a reeducation camp detainee be taken into account during the refugee screening process. While not all oceanic migrants were former reeducation camp prisoners, US policy makers emphasized the connection.

Both houses of Congress passed resolutions that denounced Hanoi's reeducation camp policy and called for the detainees' release and resettlement. While these measures were nonbinding and had no authority to compel Hanoi to act, their symbolic value remained high. In June 1989, Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA), a former Army reservist, introduced H. Con. Res. 113, which called on the SRV to "1) make public the names of all individuals who continue to be held in 'reeducation' camps; 2) immediately release all prisoners detained for their religious or political beliefs; and 3) resume negotiations with the United States concerning the emigration of current and former detainees and their families."³² Wolf noted with satisfaction that the resolution received the unanimous approval of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, a display of support that he suggested "shows just how important it is to the Congress that Vietnam demonstrate a greater commitment to human rights."³³ The resolution also tied progress on the reeducation camp issue to the formal status of US-Vietnamese relations. "The willingness of the Government of Vietnam to satisfactorily resolve this humanitarian issue," H. Con. Res. 133 declared, "will have an important bearing on the relationship between Vietnam and the United States."³⁴ Given the influential role legislators played hitherto in the normalization process, these words were far from an empty threat. Wolf's explanation and the resolution's phrasing, which entangled and conflated human rights and humanitarian rhetoric, also reflected larger trends.

Senator Rudy Boschwitz (R-MN) spearheaded the effort to shepherd S. Con. Res. 16, a duplicate of H. Con. Res. 113, through the Senate.

Boschwitz, who was a refugee himself and had labored in favor of South Vietnamese refugee admissions for over a decade, echoed his colleague's sentiments, noting that the "2,000 prisoners languishing" in the reeducation camps and former detainees were an American priority because "these people paid dearly for their affiliation with the US" and because many "have relatives in the US. For these relatives, every day is filled with anxiety and despair over the fate of their loved ones."³⁵ The moral one-two punch of Ford's "profound moral obligation" argument and the exigencies of family separation continued to inspire strong bipartisan consensus with regard to reeducation camp detainees. The measure passed both houses of Congress, just as State Department officials prepared to depart for the Geneva Conference, and US negotiators ensured the resolutions did not go unnoticed by their SRV counterparts.

By echoing legislators' demands, US diplomats infused real power and consequences into Congress' nonbinding resolutions. When addressing the seventy national delegations that attended the Geneva Conference, US Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger sent Hanoi a clear message: "The world looks to Vietnam to provide full opportunity for resettlement to those who have been detained in reeducation camps. Nothing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam could do in this area would be more favorably received by the United States and the international community."³⁶ In other words, while ASEAN and the UNHCR focused their attention on crafting a policy (the CPA) to address migrants who had already fled Vietnam, US policy makers called on Hanoi to expand emigration opportunities for those still in the SRV (though the ODP), especially reeducation camp prisoners. Eagleburger argued that the ODP would constitute a "true alternative to clandestine departure" only when Hanoi permitted former reeducation camp detainees and their families to use the program.³⁷ It is likely that these ongoing pressures contributed to Hanoi's decision to agree to resume formal negotiations on reeducation camp migration in July.³⁸

The change in international responses and US leadership between 1979 and 1989 is striking. In 1979, it was Vice President Mondale who represented the United States at the UNHCR's conference devoted to Indochinese refugees. While still not the same as a presidential appearance, Mondale's physical presence spoke volumes about increasing US support for blanket refugee status for Vietnamese migrants and for the multilateral ODP. US leadership manifest in rhetoric, resettlement slots, and financial assistance. By altering US domestic law to match the international definition of refugee, moreover, US officials created additional

continuity between domestic and international refugee regimes. By 1989, the scene had changed. Instead of pressuring other nations to embrace resettlement, US officials – headed, this time, by the Deputy Secretary of State – both supported and furthered the global shift toward individual screening and repatriation.

At the 1989 Geneva Conference, the international community forged a meaningful but fragile consensus in response to surging oceanic departures and substantive long-stayer populations in Southeast Asia. All nations present consented to the Comprehensive Plan of Action, including the new screening process.³⁹ Because the UNHCR did not have the money or manpower to individually screen migrants, it passed the task to the nations of first asylum. Although the UNHCR was supposed to provide oversight and training, the screening procedures varied drastically from country to country and even among screening officers in the same state.⁴⁰ First asylum nations, in short, “were largely not equipped” to handle the responsibilities entrusted to them, and in many cases turned to their militaries to oversee the process.⁴¹ Ultimately, just under 30 percent of Vietnamese applicants received refugee status through the CPA.⁴²

Eagleburger pledged American support for the CPA and announced the United States would take concrete steps to contribute to the program, both directly and indirectly. He vowed the US would “assign additional personnel” to the ODP which, he estimated, would permit the rate of exit interviews for potential migrants to “more than doubled to 3,500 per month.”⁴³ He also promised that the United States would resettle 22,000 of the oceanic migrants who arrived in first asylum nations prior to March 1989 and therefore received automatic refugee status. Finally, he pledged to his international counterparts that the United States would accept “up to 50%” of those who received refugee status through the CPA’s screening process.⁴⁴ This commitment to expanded resettlement for South Vietnamese with familial or employment ties to the United States dated back to 1975.

US officials, however, immediately made their selective support of the CPA known. Just as American policy makers would soon express dramatically divergent opinions about US-SRV relations and the related humanitarian programs, US officials harbored very different opinions about changing refugee norms. A press release published by Funseth’s office, for example, praised the maintenance of first asylum and Hanoi’s commitment to “expand legal emigration” under the ODP.⁴⁵ The same press release, however, emphasized the United States’ “unalterable opposition to forced repatriation to Vietnam unless and until dramatic improvements

occur in that country's economic, political and social life."⁴⁶ Many influential voices in the United States still argued that human rights violations in the SRV were widespread enough to make repatriation impossible – and illegal – under the principle of nonrefoulement. Funseth's office was sure to belabor the point, adding "there has been no compromise in this position [on repatriation] at this Conference, despite press reports to the contrary."⁴⁷ Vietnamese American activists also joined the chorus of voices in the United States who condemned the CPA and its new screening and repatriation procedures.⁴⁸

Like the American position on US-Vietnamese normalization more broadly, then, US officials assumed conflicting positions with regards to the CPA that ultimately proved irreconcilable. By pledging American support for the CPA *and* declaring US unwillingness to support forced repatriation, one of the CPA's core provisions, policy makers set the stage for future conflicts in Washington. When the CPA drew to a close during the mid-1990s, vociferous debates erupted over how to reconcile two mutually exclusive policy stances. In the meantime, US officials endorsed the CPA and opposed repatriation without having to address the contradiction. Although US support for the CPA and opposition of forced repatriation to Vietnam were ultimately untenable in terms of policy implementation, the positions were mutually reinforcing in their propaganda value. Both stances permitted American policy makers to extol the United States' humanitarian and moral responses to oceanic migrants while condemning Hanoi, which reinforced the American position of isolating the SRV and "bleeding" it into submission.

At the same time, however, US officials insisted that Hanoi collaborate on humanitarian issues. As Washington and Hanoi agreed in Geneva, the two sides formally resumed their negotiations on the emigration of reeducation camp detainees in July 1989, with Funseth leading the US delegation.⁴⁹ This time, the meeting brought tangible results. The plenipotentiaries signed a bilateral agreement on July 29 that came to be known as the Humanitarian Operation (HO) agreement. As a joint press statement explained, the HO program stemmed from a desire to solve "one of the issues of mutual concern to the two countries" and to follow through on "commitments undertaken" for the Comprehensive Plan of Action.⁵⁰

The signing of the HO agreement marked a major milestone.⁵¹ Although US officials had been lobbying for the reeducation detainees' release and resettlement abroad throughout the 1980s, this issue had stood at an impasse even as Washington and Hanoi negotiated and

implemented programs for the so-called boat people (the ODP) and Amerasians (the 1982 AIA and 1987 AHA). Like these other programs, the HO offered a special path to resettlement outside of regular channels. To be eligible for the HO program, one had to be a current or released reeducation center detainee who had spent at least three years in a reeducation camp and was “closely associated with the United States.” The “close relatives” of reeducation detainees, including spouses and unmarried children, were also eligible for emigration. This provision for unmarried children was, like the HO program itself, an exception made to US law – a special extension within a loophole – to acknowledge the unique and ongoing relationship between the American and South Vietnamese peoples. It was common practice at the time for US migration programs to limit qualifying “close family members” to spouses and unmarried children under the age of twenty-one. Permitting former reeducation detainees to bring their unmarried children, regardless of age, recognized pragmatic realities: the children of those who had been incarcerated for decades would have necessarily been more than twenty-one years old. The same provision, however, marked only the most recent example of American officials creating exceptions for South Vietnamese.

Khuc Minh Tho did not learn about the HO program by reading about it in the newspaper or seeing it on the news. After signing the HO agreement, Funseth called his wife, Marilyn, to tell her the good news. He asked Marilyn to call Tho and inform her the agreement for which she had labored so long had finally come to pass. Tho was therefore one of the first to know about the HO program and was likely informed before most US officials. One can still hear the happiness in Tho’s voice as she recalled the memory of that phone call over a decade later.⁵² The symbolism of this small act of joy and courtesy is emblematic of the tight bonds nonexecutive actors formed after years of collaboration. It is clear that the FVPPA and the Funseths formed strong connections that made their advocacy a joint, emotional experience for all. In addition to frequently meeting on Saturdays, the Association regularly sent Funseth a birthday card and, on at least one occasion, sent Marilyn a Mother’s Day card.⁵³ For the FVPPA, family clearly included both blood relatives and adopted, honorary family members like the Funseths. After hanging up with Marilyn, for example, Tho immediately began planning a greeting party to welcome Funseth when he landed at the airport. The celebrations did not end there.

The HO program was the centerpiece of the FVPPA’s annual dinner and music appreciation on August 5, 1989. As had become customary for FVPPA events, the audience included not only Vietnamese Americans but

also officials from the State Department, NSC, and Congress. Funseth gave the keynote address and expressed his hope that the accord “will come to be seen as a historic and humanitarian agreement to bring about the long awaited and long overdue reunification and resettlement of reeducation center detainees with their families.”⁵⁴ When explaining the “history of the negotiations,” Funseth told the audience, “first and foremost, your steadfast support encouraged me to persist in these negotiations until we reached our goal.”⁵⁵

In addition to recognizing the importance of the Indochina Resource Action Center and the Overseas Vietnamese Church Conference, Funseth discussed the FVPPA with especially glowing praise. “This Association,” Funseth continued, “has provided an important service for families who are trying to bring their relatives to the United States from Vietnam. They maintain files on some 10,000 people in Vietnam, including about 7,000 reeducation center detainees” and their family members.⁵⁶ The FVPPA’s access to a vast transnational network – the “Vietnamese grapevine” – made the information the Association collected especially valuable to the US government.⁵⁷ As Funseth acknowledged in his speech, “Mrs. Khuc Minh Tho and her friends meet with my staff every week in the evening to review individual cases.”⁵⁸

Other US officials were similarly enthusiastic as Funseth about the FVPPA’s advocacy. As NSC Director of Policy Development Blair Dorminey reassured the audience, “Your loved ones, your compatriots, are not forgotten at the White House. We intend to keep this issue [reeducation camp detainees] at the forefront of our agenda with Vietnam.”⁵⁹ Dorminey vowed to fight for the release of “every prisoner still incarcerated,” to follow through on the Reagan administration’s 1984 pledge to resettle former detainees and their families in the United States. The NSC official also offered a hint at the broader discussions which would soon characterize US-SRV dialogue when he promised to advocate for “the human rights of those political prisoners who are released and who choose not to emigrate.”⁶⁰

DEBATING HUMANITARIAN ISSUES IN CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES

While FVPPA had much to celebrate with the signing of the HO agreement, the viability of the just-negotiated CPA was already in doubt by the fall of 1989. As a September congressional memorandum explained, “key provisions of the CPA are in trouble.”⁶¹ Members of Congress, especially

those with ties to refugee issues and, increasingly, Vietnam War veterans, urged the administration to respond. Rudy Boschwitz, Claiborne Pell, John Kerry, John McCain, Richard Lugar, and others wrote to Secretary of State Baker on the eve of the October Steering Conference – a prescheduled meeting to discuss the implementation of the CPA – to express their concern. The senators began their letter by highlighting “the urgent need for swift and decisive US leadership.”⁶² They described the upcoming meeting as “pivotal,” explaining that many “discouraging developments,” including Malaysian pushbacks, Thai threats to close their borders, and “arbitrary and slow” screening in Hong Kong underscored “the need for strong US action.” When the Secretary of State did not heed the senators’ warning, officials forcibly repatriated migrants from Hong Kong, a move that drew condemnation from Amnesty International, the FVPPA, and many congressmen.⁶³

Ginetta Sagan’s Aurora Foundation also actively joined the conversation. Although she began sending advanced copies of her updated publication, *Report on the Violations of Human Rights in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, April 1975–December 1988*, in August, Sagan’s new study technically debuted in November 1989.⁶⁴ The report expanded on the 1984 edition using the same methodology: interviews with refugees. For the new report, Sagan and her colleagues interviewed 800 former reeducation camp detainees in the United States, Europe, and the Philippines.⁶⁵ Sagan continued to use Amnesty methods and language even as she operated outside of AI and AIUSA auspices. The press release that accompanied the report, for example, censured the SRV for detaining “many innocent Prisoners of Conscience in defiance of international Human Rights standards.”⁶⁶ The release also posited that “it is the fear of internment which prompts many Vietnamese still to flee the country.”⁶⁷ As Sagan explained in a letter to the *New York Times Magazine*, “there is no question that some refugees escape for economic reasons . . . but many [especially former detainees] fear the constant surveillance, inability of their children to obtain an education above the elementary grades, and sometime[s] being forced to move to ‘New Economic Zones.’”⁶⁸

In other words, Sagan believed the vast majority of oceanic migrants had a well-founded fear of persecution and therefore deserved refugee status. As in the late 1970s, she felt the international community underestimated the severity of human rights violations in the SRV. Sagan sent her report to Bush and to leaders of countries that had accepted large numbers of refugees, including Australia, France, Canada, and Great Britain.⁶⁹ After the *Report’s* debut, the Foundation reported that

“individuals, agencies and organizations who work with human rights and refugee issues, both nationally and internationally” all “flooded” Sagan with requests for copies.⁷⁰ Both the Aurora Foundation and the FVPPA, then, continued to provide vital information that other institutions were either unwilling or unable to amass.

In midst of continued domestic and international discussion of migration issues, the US position on POW/MIAs shifted subtly yet significantly. On the surface, things looked the same. Bush sought to achieve “MIA continuity” and thus reappointed General John Vessey as his “Special Emissary” to Hanoi. Bush and his team, however, approached POW/MIA accounting without what Michael Allen calls the “deep-seated grievances over the Vietnam War that had once emanated from the Reagan White House.”⁷¹ This different mindset facilitated increased cooperation and more realistic, if still extraordinary, American demands. As State Department officials attended the Steering Meeting, for example, Vessey met with SRV officials in Hanoi. These discussions produced results: “field activities [in Vietnam] continued at an all-time high, with crash-site visits and interviews throughout the year, resulting in the identification of thirty-three Americans” in Bush’s first year in office.⁷² In November, Bush publicly applauded Hanoi’s “stepped-up spirit of cooperation,” and dismissed the idea of the SRV “government holding facilities for [American] remains,” a longtime article of faith among many MIA activists.⁷³

In stark contrast to Reagan, who had given activists the benefit of the doubt and put the burden of proof on Hanoi to disprove accusations, Bush rejected POW/MIA activists’ claims when there was no evidence to support them. This approach splintered the already fractured POW/MIA lobby into competing groups, some of which supported and believed the president’s claims, while others felt Bush’s approach abdicated the government’s responsibility to POW/MIA families. Turnover in official positions also weakened the League’s relative lobbying power. Although Griffiths retained her place on the Interagency Task Force, her close allies Richard Childress and Richard Armitage lost their seats, which diminished Griffiths’s ability to influence official policy.⁷⁴ These dynamics created conditions that enabled Bush to attempt to move forward on POW/MIA accounting in a way that his predecessor could or would not.

The dramatic events of November 1989 and the reverberations they created only added to that sense of possibility. On November 9, 1989, citizens of East Berlin scaled the Berlin Wall, signaling the death knell of the Cold War.⁷⁵ The 1989 revolutions that swept throughout Eastern

Europe and the recognition that the Soviet Union and international communism no longer posed a significant threat to American interests or national security invited the Bush administration, on a much larger scale, to reject decades' old assumptions about American foreign policy.

Regional trends only added to the possibilities created by international events. The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council met every other month in the first half of 1990 to devise a UN-led solution to the question of political power in Cambodia after ASEAN-led initiatives proved unworkable.⁷⁶ In July, congressional and human rights activists scored a major victory when US Secretary of State James Baker announced the United States would cut off its funds to the rebel coalition, which included supporting the genocidal Khmer Rouge.⁷⁷ Finally, the US ceased supporting the regime that Carter labeled "the worst violator of human rights in the world today."⁷⁸ The following month, the Security Council published an agreement enumerating a framework for regime change in Phnom Penh.⁷⁹ With these breakthroughs, the two conditions which American officials argued made official normalization talks impossible – Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and POW/MIA accounting – both began to seem less formidable barriers to formal relations. Like US policy on a broad scale, then, American officials had the opportunity to reconsider their approach to the SRV as conditions transformed abruptly.

Progress on humanitarian issues, which had been normalizing relations despite the contradictions in US policy, meanwhile, proceeded apace. In January 1990, the first former reeducation camp detainees arrived in the United States through the HO program. The FVPPA had been preparing for the moment for months; as always, the Association worked closely with government officials. The Association was an active member of a "joint public/private task force" established "to help with the resettlement of former reeducation center detainees."⁸⁰ Tho had the honor of giving the keynote address during the first symposium.⁸¹ Senator Art Torres (D-CA), chairman of that meeting, wrote to Tho to thank her for attending, adding, "It was so good to meet you after all I have heard about your successful advocacy efforts."⁸² That this statement of admiration and appreciation ran from a male congressman to a female non-governmental advocate and refugee, and not the other way around, demonstrates the FVPPA's institutional power and Tho's pervasive personal influence.

The arrival of the first former reeducation camp detainees and their families through the HO program represented more than a milestone in

US policy; it was a momentous occasion for Vietnamese American communities. Ultimately, more than 167,000 traveled through the program.⁸³ This significant influx not only increased the size of diasporic communities in the United States; it also changed their character. Tuan Hoang has shown that the arrival of former reeducation camp prisoners and their families, whose lives were inexorably shaped by the “carceral experience,” prompted a surge in “anticommunist activism.”⁸⁴ The HO program remained open through the early twenty-first century and, thanks in large part to the FVPPA’s efforts, the number of eligible individuals expanded rather than contracted during the program’s existence.⁸⁵

FVPPA’s relationship with Vietnamese American anticommunism is thus paradoxical. The Association championed increased US-SRV ties for the specific purpose of securing the detainees’ release and resettlement. Those contacts and negotiations, however, contributed to the normalizing of relations in a much broader sense. At the same time, however, by helping to facilitate the resettlement of such a large number of former detainees and their families in the United States, the FVPPA helped create the conditions that led to a surge in diasporic opposition to the very ties – US-SRV collaboration – that facilitated the former detainees’ emigration in the first place.

Even after the first detainees began arriving through the HO program in January of 1990, Tho and her associates still fought persistently to expand ODP quotas for reeducation detainees and to make the program as inclusive as possible.⁸⁶ In addition to highlighting the plight of former reeducation detainees, FVPPA also lobbied to make the resettlement program available to the wives and children of detainees who died while imprisoned, an effort that would have a major impact. According to Sagan’s updated *Report*, the reeducation camps had a 10 percent mortality rate between 1975 and 1979.⁸⁷ While having reason to celebrate, then, the FVPPA still had much it wished to accomplish.

Those concerned about the maintenance of first asylum in Southeast Asia also faced an uphill battle. Conditions had deteriorated enough that the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the House’s Committee on Foreign Affairs held hearings on the surge in oceanic departures in July 1990. Lionel A. Rosenblatt, the Executive Director of an NGO called Refugees International, pulled no punches. He argued that the “crisis of first asylum for Vietnamese refugees” had reached such proportions that the world had only seen “one other instance of this gravity, in 1979.”⁸⁸ He noted the Malaysia pushback policy – which forced at least eight thousand souls back to sea – as the most “immediate problem” but argued of “even greater concern is the threat by all the ASEAN asylum countries to follow

the Malaysian lead and abandon first asylum in July or thereafter.”⁸⁹ In testimony that contained strong echoes of the Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees’ indictment of Carter, Rosenblatt lamented “the Administration stands firm against mandatory repatriation, without providing the necessary leadership to sustain first asylum,” and explicitly called “on President Bush and the Administration for active leadership to sustain the CPA before it is too late.”⁹⁰ As Representative Stephen J. Solarz (D-NY) opined in a letter to Bush: “I believe that only your personal intervention and leadership can prevent the recurrence of such a humanitarian and foreign policy disaster.”⁹¹

The legality of repatriation hinged on one’s assessment of internal SRV conditions. Since 1975, American policy makers had consistently argued that Hanoi’s human rights violations made repatriation unethical and unlawful. Representative Frank Wolf, for example, cautioned that although some former reeducation camp detainees and their families had settled in the United States, “thousands remain” in Vietnam, including “a great many of those trying to flee . . . in desperation and without hope for their integration into a society which, fifteen years after the Vietnam conflict, has failed to institute basic human rights protections.”⁹² NSC officials also echoed this assessment. When speaking at the FVPPA’s Annual Dinner, for example, Dorminey noted the “grim” conditions inside Vietnam, and made his opposition to repatriation known when he explained: “we may expect that large numbers of Vietnamese will continue to choose to leave Vietnam – and who can blame them for leaving a country that offers little except repression and hardship.”⁹³

Although many in the US government still opposed repatriating migrants to Vietnam, the Bush administration proceeded with support for the CPA in a July 1990 ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference in Indonesia. This position reflected both the personal proclivities of the president and the wider changes occurring within the US bureaucracy. “Bush,” Garcia explains, “personally resisted the idea of granting automatic refugee or parole status to those fleeing countries transitioning from communism.” At the same time, however, the president honored the “humanitarian obligation to those populations championed by his predecessor,” often trying to “find a middle way to reconcile” these various impulses.⁹⁴ Thus, while Bush maintained the long-articulated US commitment to former reeducation camp detainees and their families which came to fruition in the 1989 HO program, his administration also supported the CPA’s case-by-case approach and embrace of repatriation to the SRV for screened-out migrants. While in Jakarta, therefore, Secretary of State

Baker proclaimed American support for a “multilateral pledge to undertake ‘best efforts’ to accomplish the return [to Vietnam] or resettlement of all Vietnamese asylum seekers by the end of 1992.”⁹⁵ While the many members of the US bureaucracy who had an input in the formulation and implementation of American policy remained deeply opposed to repatriation, Baker’s announcement signaled the administration’s intention to fully support the CPA, including repatriation.

The promises Baker offered in July of 1990, combined with assurances of high US resettlement numbers for long-stayer populations, prompted the ASEAN Foreign Ministers to confirm their commitment to the CPA and cease pushback policies.⁹⁶ In October, during the annual congressional consultation hearings required by the Refugee Act of 1980, the administration proposed 52,000 slots to be devoted to the Orderly Departure Program and First Asylum for East Asia for FY 1991, in addition to a “substantial increase” in the anticipated number of “immigrant petitions” through the ODP because many South Vietnamese had obtained US citizenship.⁹⁷

Among those who arrived in the United States in 1990 was Khuc Minh Tho’s oldest daughter.⁹⁸ Fifteen years had eclipsed since the fall of Saigon, and due to Tho’s employment in the Philippines from 1972 to 1975, eighteen years had passed since the pair lived in the same country. This was literally more than half a lifetime for Tho’s thirty-one-year-old daughter. Despite all of the time lost, Tho had reason to rejoice; in 1990, she was reunited with all three children for the first time since they were young. While FVPPA records do not contain Tho’s personal reflections on this long-awaited moment, one imagines that she must have felt a sense of fulfillment and joy that had eluded her for years and a deep pleasure in knowing that she found a way, amid war, upheaval, and separation, to keep the vow she had made to her first husband after his death that she would find a way to take care of their family. At the same time, the organization she headed helped facilitate similar reunifications for thousands of other families. Although this task – and the promise that she had made to her friend to try to find a way to free their husbands from reeducation camps – remained unfinished, for the first time in a decade, Tho had reason to be truly optimistic that she could soon bring that effort to a conclusion as well.

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

At the May 1990 annual meeting of the Aurora Foundation’s Board of Directors, Ginetta Sagan announced that she planned to close the

organization. The meeting minutes reflect that Sagan expressed her desire to “close Aurora but still be available to help out in emergencies by using her vast network of contacts.”⁹⁹ The sixty-five-year-old Sagan, who never fully recovered from injuries she received in a car accident in Poland in the late 1980s, reported to her colleagues that her work with the Aurora Foundation had “been time consuming, energy demanding and rewarding” and she now planned to “devote time to her book.”¹⁰⁰ The May 1990 meeting did not mark the end of Sagan’s advocacy on behalf of political prisoners in Vietnam or elsewhere, but thereafter her interventions were far fewer. The accolades Sagan would receive for her decades of human rights activism, however, were just beginning.

As Sagan brought a significant chapter of her life to a close, the United States and SRV turned a new page in their bilateral relations. In September 1990, Secretary of State Baker and SRV Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach met in New York City, marking “the highest-level discussions between the two nations since 1973.”¹⁰¹ Baker thanked Thach for his cooperation in Cambodia, for the continued progress on POW/MIAs, and also invited him to come to Washington the following month for continued discussions.¹⁰²

The offer marked another major milestone. While US officials – Vessey, State Department officials like Robert Funseth, NSC figures like Richard Childress, and even NGO representatives like Ann Mills Griffiths – had all been to Hanoi many times to discuss humanitarian concerns, SRV officials had yet to travel to Washington in the post-1975 era. In fact, SRV representatives in New York City for United Nations meetings were restricted to a twenty-five-mile radius of the UN building, and thus could not even travel to DC as tourists. A November 1988 policy review had earmarked inviting SRV leaders to the US capital as a possible reward for “progress in our humanitarian dialogue with Vietnam.”¹⁰³ It seems Hanoi interpreted the invitation in precisely that way. The same month that American policy makers extended the invitation, Thach announced that Vietnam would release all remaining reeducation detainees – which Hanoi put at one hundred – by the spring of 1991.¹⁰⁴

Many observers correctly noted that these advancements represented a swift and significant improvement in US-Vietnamese relations and called on Washington and Hanoi to accelerate the resumption of formal ties. In late summer, an impressive group of NGOs assembled in New York City to “discuss recent developments in the region and to consider policy options.”¹⁰⁵ Among the eighteen NGOs present were some of the most influential in facilitating refugee resettlement, including representatives from

Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopal groups. Institutions like the AFL-CIO, Tolstoy Foundation, Indochina Resource Action Center, Institute for Democracy in Vietnam, United States Committee for Refugees, World Relief, Agency International, and World Vision also attended. These organizations sent a joint letter to Bush and Baker, calling on them to “start a political dialogue” with Vietnam “that includes all facets of bilateral relationship – trade, development and human rights, including free speech and religious freedom.”¹⁰⁶ Citing the “recent dramatic developments in central and eastern Europe,” the NGOs argued “that increased economic, cultural, political and diplomatic contact can foster positive internal change.”

The NGOs also wrote to the Vietnamese Council of State. They argued that the SRV “holds the key” to resuming full economic and diplomatic relations.¹⁰⁷ After praising Hanoi’s cooperation in Cambodia, the NGOs noted that there were other “reforms which would ... undoubtedly expedite the process of normalization.”¹⁰⁸ These included “1) releasing all remaining re-education camp detainees and other prisoners of conscience, and allowing them to emigrate”; “2) abolishing criminal code provisions against unauthorized departures and facilitating the reintegration” of repatriates “without penalty or discrimination”; and “3) permitting greater latitude in exercise of basic freedoms including religious liberty and the expression of views.”¹⁰⁹ The NGOs took pains to applaud existing reform measures and acknowledged that their requests, especially the last recommendation, “must be part of a process” and take time. That so many well-informed, influential organizations put forth these types of recommendations in October of 1990 demonstrates the sense of possibility and opportunity that infused that historical moment.

Members of Congress also took notice. McCain, in particular, took pains to record his view on the topic of “a new relationship with Vietnam” in the *Congressional Record*. He disagreed with the coalition of NGOs in several fundamental respects. The Senator argued that the high-level meeting in New York and Thach’s trip to Washington “should complete for the time being the administration’s series of symbolic gestures toward Vietnam.”¹¹⁰ After mentioning his abortive attempt to establish interest sections in 1988, he suggested that the fulfillment of SRV promises “must be extracted from Hanoi repeatedly, day after day.”¹¹¹ McCain thus argued “continued contact with Hanoi at lower than ministerial levels is advisable for the foreseeable future provided that such contacts” are limited to “outstanding humanitarian issues.”¹¹²

McCain then laid out what by then had become the standard American definition of “humanitarian issues” vis-à-vis Vietnam. While POW/MIA

accounting remained “the humanitarian question that concerns most Americans,” the former POW emphasized that the United States should not “open diplomatic and trade relations before” the “100 or more” reeducation detainees who “have been there since the fall of Saigon” were “freed and permitted to emigrate.”¹¹³ McCain thus called for the United States to proceed cautiously and ensure that humanitarian issues were fully addressed before full normalization, “for what we seek by improving relations is nothing less than the conclusion of the final chapter of the war in Vietnam.”¹¹⁴ McCain’s insight that the post-1975 period was not an afterthought to the Vietnam War but an important “final chapter” of the conflict demonstrates the ways the truism that wars are easy to begin but difficult to end plays out in practice.

The FVPPA also ensured that US officials knew where it stood on the dramatic thaw in relations. Tho wrote to Bush and other government officials late in 1990 in response to a “recent news article indicating that the United States is now ready for Vietnam talks.”¹¹⁵ “As US citizens it is our hope,” Tho explained, “that the Vietnamese political prisoners are included in the process towards full diplomatic relations with Vietnam.”¹¹⁶ Until this point, the FVPPA avoided any specific comment on US-SRV bilateral relations; however, the prospect that economic and diplomatic ties might quickly resume changed the organization’s stance. “We have been waiting nearly 16 years to be reunited with our loved ones,” Tho lamented, “and we feel that it is imperative that their fate also be included in this stage of formal discussions.”¹¹⁷ This 1990 letter to Bush crystalized the FVPPA’s support for what by then had become a common demand in congressional resolutions and ongoing US-Vietnamese discussions: Hanoi needed to release reeducation camp detainees and allow them to depart as a precondition for the resumption of formal economic and diplomatic ties.

THE ROADMAP

In January and February 1991, images of Operation Desert Storm dominated the nightly news in the United States. The previous summer Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, invaded neighboring Kuwait, which violated Kuwaiti sovereignty and also threatened neighboring Saudi Arabia. Collectively, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia controlled 20 percent of the world’s oil supply. After stationing US troops to shield Saudi Arabia from a possible invasion (in Operation Desert Shield) and securing a UN resolution condemning Iraqi aggression, Bush gave Hussein an ultimatum to leave Iraq by

January 15, 1991, or face a US-led UN military response. After the deadline passed, US bombers, including the iconic F-117 stealth fighter, devastated Iraqi military targets ahead of a February 24th ground invasion. After only one hundred hours, the coalition forces declared victory.¹¹⁸

Many Americans experienced and interpreted the Gulf War through the prism of the Vietnam War. The day after US-led coalition's victory, Bush noted in a triumphant speech before the American Legislative Exchange Council, "It's a proud day for America."¹¹⁹ In the most famous line of the speech, the president remarked, "And, by God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all."¹²⁰ For the US military, the victory "meant redemption," marking the triumph of the All-Volunteer Force and putting an exclamation mark on the resurgence of the military and US soldiers in the public esteem that had taken place over the course of the 1980s.¹²¹ Americans showered their troops with gratitude and ticker-tape parades once they returned stateside, celebrations which clearly indicated that "the Vietnam-era image of the soldier as a broken or rebellious draftee" had been definitively replaced "with the unquestioned notion of the volunteer service member as hero."¹²² This transformation empowered veterans in Congress with a special political capital, which they often used to exercise substantive influence in the US-SRV normalization process.

Amid these dramatic events, the FVPPA remained focused on its long-time goal to secure the release and resettlement of reeducation camp detainees and its newfound objective to ensure these goals became a precondition for formal US-Vietnamese relations. The previous October, Thach promised to release the remaining reeducation detainees, which he estimated at 100 persons. In January 1991, however, the FVPPA wrote to Assistant Secretary of State Richard Solomon to inform him that the Association had "a list of one hundred thirty-three (133)" prisoners being held in "only several camps," which led Tho to believe that the total number of detainees still incarcerated must be higher.¹²³ That same month, the FVPPA wrote to its many friends in Congress and asked them to support a resolution calling on Hanoi to keep its word and, at long last, release the final detainees.¹²⁴

The Senate quickly complied. Ted Kennedy, Claiborne Pell, John McCain, Alan K. Simpson (R-CO), Richard Lugar (R-IN), and Bob Packwood (R-OR) cosponsored the resolution that the FVPPA requested, and Frank Wolf introduced a similar resolution in the House at the end of January.¹²⁵ When introducing the measure, Kennedy recalled the

resolution he, Dole, and Pell cosponsored in 1987, and noted that the reeducation camps' population had dwindled from "several thousand" to "only about 150." The prominent Democrat explained that he and his cosponsors were making the renewed appeal not only to the SRV but also to "our own administration to ensure that no stone is left unturned in the essential task of reuniting these families."¹²⁶ While the international and domestic contexts had changed dramatically since the 1987 resolution, family reunification remained a consistent point of emphasis.

That leading members of Congress would view the task of reuniting South Vietnamese families as "essential" in 1991 was a testament to the Vietnam War's long shadow and the power that the FVPPA could wield, among other factors. Kennedy made the explicit connection himself. "I want particularly to commend the untiring efforts of the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association, under the able leadership of Mrs. Khuc Minh Tho," he explained, adding that "the families have been an inspiration to us all, as they have struggled to succeed in America, while coping with the long separation from loved ones still in Vietnam."¹²⁷ Just as the pain and suffering of American POW/MIA families had justified the most publicized tenet of the United States' humanitarian-based approach, the torment of family separation experienced by the South Vietnamese also underwrote US policy.

The FVPPA, however, did not rest on Kennedy's compliments. As American boots were on the ground in the Persian Gulf, Tho secured multiple meetings with the State Department officials, including one with Assistant Secretary of State Solomon. The Association discussed a potential link between the emigration of former reeducation detainees and formal US-SRV ties at multiple points. "In the future," the FVPPA's agenda for the meeting began, when "discussions are undertaken on normalization of relations with Vietnam, we request that one of the conditions be the immediate release and freedom to emigrate for all political prisoners. In addition, the human rights of those who choose to remain in Vietnam must be respected by the Vietnamese government."¹²⁸ Although the FVPPA's records do not contain minutes of this meeting, succeeding events suggest that the Association's request found receptive ears.

In the wake of American victory in the Gulf, Bush enjoyed a 90 percent approval rating. Polls suggested, "although Americans were less inclined to support full recognition of Vietnam, 70% favored lifting the embargo."¹²⁹ In this atmosphere of possibility, Solomon met with the SRV representatives to the UN and presented them with a "Roadmap to US-SRV Normalization" on April 9. The Roadmap contained four

phases, and each phase had a list of reciprocal SRV and US actions. Once both nations fulfilled all of the requirements for a specific phase, the two would move on, until, ultimately, they achieved full economic and diplomatic relations. Historians have described the Vietnamese response to the Roadmap as “lukewarm,” explaining “Hanoi both welcomed and resented the roadmap.”¹³⁰ Despite the ambivalent SRV response, the Roadmap presented, for the first time, a clear, written plan toward official ties, and symbolized a profound shift in attitude if not policy. While US officials had used (the lack of) formal economic and diplomatic relations to perpetuate hostilities with Hanoi, the Roadmap signaled a much more conciliatory tone and a willingness to pursue bilateral ties.

Contemporaries and scholars have correctly identified the two issues that received the most attention in the Roadmap: steps involving a political settlement in Cambodia and progress on a full accounting of POW/MIAs. Throughout much of the 1980s, both of these obstacles seemed insurmountable as both Hanoi’s refusal to withdraw its troops and *Rambomania* remained out of the US government’s control. Even though the Reagan administration actively fomented the flames of POW/MIA activism, it never controlled advocates nor could it quiet accusations that the US government was engaged in a conspiracy to conceal the existence of live American prisoners. While it is for good reason that these two causes received the most attention in public discussions of the Roadmap, then, in hindsight it is equally obvious that issues on which Washington and Hanoi had been actively collaborating were also incorporated. Phase I, for example, included “the release of those remaining Vietnamese detainees eligible for the ODP reeducation resettlement program and permit their departure if they so desire” as a condition the SRV had to fulfill for the two sides to move to Phase II.¹³¹ This clause reiterated a requirement that congressional resolutions and US diplomats had been articulating for years. It also enshrined the FVPPA’s recent request as a formal aspect of US policy.

These ongoing measures combined with the Roadmap’s specifications left little room for doubt about the importance US officials attached to the detainees’ release and resettlement. While the Roadmap made specific reference to reeducation camp detainees, it also included a broad clause that gave US officials maneuverability to ensure that humanitarian issues were resolved to American satisfaction. The document’s introduction, for instance, explains that “the pace and scope of the normalization process will be directly influenced by your government’s degree of cooperation on the POW/MIA and other humanitarian issues.”¹³² By this time, “other

humanitarian issues” had become shorthand for the migration of South Vietnamese to achieve family reunification, including reeducation camp prisoners, Amerasians, and, more broadly, emigration through the ODP.

On April 11, two days after the US officials presented their Vietnamese counterparts with the Roadmap, Solomon informed Congress that if the SRV complied quickly, official ties would resume “in short order.”¹³³ This testimony reflected the language of the Roadmap itself, which explained to Hanoi that recent progress in Cambodia opened a “window of opportunity” and suggested “it would be regrettable if we did not take advantage ... and finally normalize relations.”¹³⁴ At first, events suggested that the two sides might achieve exactly that. In April, the United States made “its first aid donation to Vietnam since 1975,” a \$1.3 million grant from the Agency for International Development.¹³⁵ Vessey returned to the SRV for continued negotiations and in June 1991 the two sides opened a joint office for MIA issues in Hanoi.¹³⁶ Also in June, Congress held hearings on the embargo, and the occasion marked what Martini calls “a significant turning point in the discourse about US-Vietnamese relations” as the growing power of business interests, and their demands to gain access to Vietnamese consumers, began to equal and even eclipse POW/MIA-based arguments.¹³⁷

The AID funds, MIA office, and embargo hearings all suggested that Solomon’s prediction might come true – Washington and Hanoi might normalize relations “in short order.” Events in the summer of 1991 derailed the momentum of the previous six months, however. The cause was, by this point, to be expected: domestic POW/MIA politics. In March, Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator Bob Smith (R-NH), both leading members of the congressional “Rambo faction,” reinvigorated their efforts to create a congressional select committee on POW/MIA Affairs.¹³⁸ Both men were navy veterans; Helms served during World War II and Smith in the early 1960s, including a year in Vietnam. Smith also lost his father in World War II without ever having learned the circumstances of his death, giving him a deep personal connection to the POW/MIA cause. During his time in Congress, Smith passionately advocated for an extreme view of “full accounting.”¹³⁹ The two senators tried various tactics to secure the creation of another Select Committee but failed. The tide changed in July, when they published photographs that appeared to confirm the existence of live American POWs.¹⁴⁰ Three separate photographs, all later discredited as forgeries, suddenly appeared on the front pages of major US newspapers and magazines in the span of

a few weeks, reinvigorating Rambomania and temporarily halting progress on the Roadmap.¹⁴¹

Amid the public uproar, the Senate voted unanimously to create the Select Committee, which was established on August 2, 1991.¹⁴² Democratic Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-ME) appointed John Kerry (D-MA) to chair the committee. Kerry, a former navy lieutenant, was perhaps best known for his involvement with Vietnam Veterans Against the War, particularly his eloquent testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in April 1971. Other Democrats on the committee included Bob Kerry (D-NE), a US Navy SEAL, Vietnam War veteran, and Medal of Honor Recipient; Charles “Chuck” Robb (D-VA), a Marine who served in the Vietnam War; Tom Daschle (D-SD), a US Air Force veteran; and Herb Kohl (D-WI), a US Army Reservist. Notable Republican members included Smith, who acted as vice-chairman; Helms; John McCain; and Hank Brown (R-CO), who volunteered to serve in Vietnam as a forward air controller in the navy. This veteran-stacked committee included well-known members from both parties who displayed a wide range of views about the Vietnam War. That veteran status was seen as a legitimizing, rather than disqualifying, illustrated just how differently the American public viewed Vietnam War veterans in the early 1990s than they had in the 1970s. In an echo of the plot of *Rambo First Blood: Part II* and the credibility gap that the *Pentagon Papers* revealed, it seems that the Senate knew that the American public was highly suspicious of its government and only trusted veterans, men who had fought for their country like Rambo, to provide “real” answers regarding the fates of missing American servicemen. The Committee raised the hopes of MIA activists and demonstrated that the White House could not dictate the scope and pace of US-Vietnamese normalization; Congress was determined to have its say.

As Capitol Hill halted the rapid progress that had occurred throughout the summer, changes in SRV leadership also made forward progress more difficult. Hanoi replaced Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, who had worked closely with the United States for years on humanitarian issues, with a new negotiator: Vo Van Kiet.¹⁴³ Thach, Phuong Nguyen explains, “was one of the few and strongest proponents of normalizing relations with the United States.”¹⁴⁴ Thach’s loss of his Foreign Minister Post and Politburo seat, directly tied to what some of his peers “perceived as his hastened approach toward Washington” revealed that “*Doi Moi* would go ahead but only at a pace which the most conservative elements [in Hanoi] could be comfortable with.”¹⁴⁵

Despite the potential wrench these changes threatened to throw into advancing normal ties, however, both sides continued to make positive overtures. In September, Hanoi announced that it released fifteen reeducation detainees that had been incarcerated since 1975 and stated that it planned to release all remaining detainees by early spring 1992.¹⁴⁶ Most crucially, on October 23, 1991, the various parties formally ratified the United Nations' Peace Plan at the second session of the Paris Conference on Cambodia.¹⁴⁷ The signing satisfied the single largest obstacle in Phase I of the Roadmap, and the United States quickly responded with its concomitant requirements according to Phase I. In October, Baker permanently lifted the longtime travel ban on SRV diplomats and also ended travel restrictions on Americans wishing to visit Vietnam.¹⁴⁸ In late November, the two sides met in New York for the first round of talks on official bilateral relations since 1978.¹⁴⁹

As Washington and Hanoi progressed through the Roadmap's requirements in the fall of 1991, the FVPPA continued to play a vital role in the politics of information. Solarz sent a list that the Association had compiled of recently released reeducation detainees to his colleagues in the House in December 1991.¹⁵⁰ In February 1992, when Hanoi released forty-two detainees, the FVPPA once again provided US officials with information on the men, including their former ARVN rank.¹⁵¹ Most crucially, however, Tho and her associates kept the US government apprised of those still detained, which in February 1992 amounted to "about twenty."¹⁵² Indeed, the FVPPA's information so exceeded other sources that in March Dr. Lewis M. Stern, the Country Director for Indochina, Thailand, and Burma in the Pentagon, wrote to Tho asking to be added to the organization's mailing list "for information concerning Vietnamese political prisoners still detained, and future information concerning release dates."¹⁵³ Tho and her team also continued to answer queries from Amnesty International, and provided AI with regularly updated lists as well.¹⁵⁴

In early April, Hanoi released sixteen additional reeducation detainees. This left, according to the FVPPA's records, only seven reeducation camp detainees still incarcerated.¹⁵⁵ Later that month, Kerry wrote to Kiet to applaud the "considerable progress made in recent months toward improved relations between my government and yours."¹⁵⁶ While Kerry mentioned POW/MIAs briefly, the POW/MIA Select Committee Chairman informed Kiet that he was writing to share his "particular concern" about the "military and civilian officials who remain in reeducation camps." "Their release at this time," he elaborated, "would contribute significantly to the healing of wounds stemming from the time

of the war.”¹⁵⁷ Clear statements such as this – appearing not only in unanimous resolutions from Congress but in high-level diplomatic correspondences – helped ensure that reeducation camp detainees’ inclusion in the Roadmap remained far more than a footnote. That Kerry’s position as chairman of a congressional committee warranted correspondence with the SRV head of state also demonstrates Congress’ continued importance in the larger normalization process.

Washington and Hanoi continued to take steps toward more formal bilateral ties. In January, the State Department lifted the ban on travel to Vietnam and gave American companies the green light to plan accommodations for Vietnamese visitors.¹⁵⁸ In April, Kerry led a congressional delegation to the SRV. While Vietnamese leaders balked at the American delegation’s requests for permission to fly US helicopters “freely” around Vietnam to search for MIA remains, SRV leaders went out of their way to accommodate the delegation, allowing the Americans to make “short-notice inspections” on various sites and to, “look at whatever they wanted.”¹⁵⁹

When the delegation returned stateside, US officials responded in kind. On April 29, seventeen years after US helicopters were in midst of the final US evacuation, an administrative spokesman announced that the United States would grant two exceptions to the embargo “in keeping with the established US policy of a step-by-step process for normalizing relations with Vietnam.”¹⁶⁰ The first was to permit “commercial sales to meet basic human needs” and the second was to “lift restrictions on projects by non-governmental and non-profit organizations in Vietnam.”¹⁶¹ The US government also announced it would allow Americans to wire money directly to Vietnam, a move that let members of the Indochinese diaspora in the United States send funds safely and directly, without fear of confiscation, for the first time since 1975.¹⁶²

In May, Hanoi released the last reeducation detainees. In a news ticker that Wolf forwarded to Tho, a Vietnamese Foreign Ministry official explained that “the release of all former officials sent for re-education when South Vietnam fell under communist rule in 1975 was one of three conditions set by the United States government for lifting the economic embargo and establishing diplomatic relations with Hanoi.”¹⁶³ In a move typical of the FVPPA’s strategic and emotionally poignant lobbying, the Association sent out numerous letters of joy, thanks, and congratulations to officials in positions throughout the US government with whom it had worked so closely over the past decade.¹⁶⁴

In July, both the FVPPA and the National League of POW/MIA Families held organizational meetings. The marked difference between

the two occasions demonstrates the relative standing of each organization by 1992 and the direction each would take over the course of the next administration. At the FVPPA's Annual Reunion Picnic, Funseth, Thomas Raezer (Department of State), Dr. Lewis M. Stern (Department of Defense), and Dr. Nguyen Van Hanh (Deputy Director, Office of Resettlement for Refugees, Department of Health & Human Services) all gave speeches to an audience of US officials and Vietnamese American community members, including former reeducation detainees.¹⁶⁵ In his speech, Hanh, who graduated from the US Army's Officer Candidate School in 1967 and went on to serve in South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu's government, commended the FVPPA "for all its efforts, over many years, to effect the release of the former political prisoners."¹⁶⁶ "Throughout my decades of work with refugees in California and the nation," he went on, "I must say that I have encountered only a few such groups as yours. Your dedication, volunteerism, and efforts, the financial burden you have taken upon yourselves, and your time spent on behalf of the former political prisoners are worthy of more than any words I can express."¹⁶⁷ By the mid-1990s, the FVPPA had established itself as a prominent NGO that commanded US policy makers' attention and respect. By all accounts, the occasion was a joyous celebration of a successful, harmonious relationship that fostered major progress on an issue that had remained largely at an impasse until 1988.

The same could not be said for the meeting that took place two days prior. Bush appeared before the League at its annual convention, a testament to the organization's stature in American domestic politics. Almost as soon as the president began speaking, however, a group of attendees broke into a chant of "No more lies! Tell the truth!"¹⁶⁸ When he continued, the crowd once again interjected and then Bush, "his jaw tightening and finger wagging, exploded at them: 'Would you please shut up and sit down!'"¹⁶⁹ The incident ran in all the major media outlets the next day, which certainly did not help the president in an election year.

The contrast between the FVPPA and the League's meetings could not be sharper. Although the League still warranted a presidential appearance, Bush's 1992 keynote marked the last time a sitting president bestowed such an honor on the League's proceedings.¹⁷⁰ While the FVPPA and US officials worked collaboratively and productively toward a common cause, the League lost its control over members who still hoped for the impossible: the return of live American prisoners.

The Bush administration continued to move forward on POW/MIA negotiations whether or not the most extreme advocates were willing to

join. In October, Vessey returned to Hanoi, accompanied by McCain and Kerry, as delegates from the Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs. As a result of this visit, Washington and Hanoi issued a joint statement to announce “an important new step which should accelerate results on the POW/MIA issue.”¹⁷¹ The “new step” included US access to extensive archival documents, including those housed in Vietnamese military museums, and a pledge from SRV officials to conduct a “country-wide search of all its archives for documents, photographs and other materials related to American POW/MIA cases.”¹⁷² Vessey had been attempting to secure access to such material for three years, and allowing foreign access to its classified archives demonstrates the extent to which US-SRV had already normalized and were further integrating, if not in all areas.¹⁷³

The president held a press conference after his debriefing with Vessey, McCain, and Kerry. Bush described the agreement as “significant, a real breakthrough,” and applauded Vessey and the Senators’ initiatives to “get to the bottom of this matter.”¹⁷⁴ “And today, finally, I am convinced,” the president noted triumphantly, “that we can begin writing the last chapter of the Vietnam War.”¹⁷⁵ In the following weeks, the US government acquiesced in a \$375 million Japanese loan to the SRV and also permitted US companies to begin signing contracts “to be executed should the embargo with Vietnam be lifted.”¹⁷⁶

By 1992, US policy makers and pundits had pronounced the “end” or “last chapter” of the Vietnam War at least half a dozen times. The 1973 Peace of Paris Accords, Ford’s speech at Tulane University on April 23, 1975, the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, and the closing of the last refugee reception center in the United States on December 20, 1975, all inspired American officials to proclaim the war’s end.¹⁷⁷ Such declarations were only beginning, as McCain’s 1990 statement and Bush’s 1992 proclamation make clear. Both men agreed on the fact that the “last chapter” of the Vietnam War had yet to be written and clearly connected the resolution of humanitarian issues to the ongoing narrative. By focusing the preponderant amount of our scholarly attention on the war’s origins and military phase, we have overlooked some of the most compelling pages of the Vietnam War.

CONCLUSION

The systemic changes that culminated with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 created an atmosphere of flexibility that reverberated

widely in world geopolitics. At the same time that these changes invited US officials to reexamine decades-old assumptions, a new generation of SRV leadership came to power and, after years of negotiations and incremental withdrawals, fully removed Vietnamese troops from Phenom Penh. These major shifts, combined with the Bush administration's inclination to approach a "full accounting" of missing American servicemen differently than its predecessor, signaled that official economic and diplomatic relations between Washington and Hanoi might be imminent. Although the 1991 Roadmap to Normalization perpetuated the American practice of making extraordinary demands, it also symbolized a profound change in tone. Later that year, US and SRV policy makers had the first formal talks on reestablishing official ties since 1978.

Amid these larger changes, the American commitment to humanitarian issues continued. Washington and Hanoi signed the long-awaited HO agreement in July of 1989, the first prisoners arrived in the United States through the new program in January of 1990, the United States included detainees in the April 1991 Roadmap, and Hanoi released the last reeducation detainees in 1992. NGOs like the Aurora Foundation and, especially, the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoner Association, assembled the information and helped create the momentum that made this issue one of the top concerns on the American agenda. In addition to these nonstate actors, members of Congress played a vital role in dictating the scope and pace of US-SRV relations. By passing resolutions that became institutionalized in US policy, forming influential committees, corresponding privately with Vietnamese leaders, sending delegations to Vietnam, making speeches, and fomenting domestic constituencies, legislators both accelerated US-Vietnamese ties and erected barriers to further normalization.

While congressional activism and US advocacy in support of reeducation camp detainees remained ongoing facets of the American approach to normalization, other key features of the US position shifted noticeably. First, by rescinding the previous practice of granting automatic refugee status to oceanic migrants and supporting repatriation if necessary, the Comprehensive Plan of Action fundamentally altered the United States' and international community's application of the principles of first asylum and nonrefoulment to Southeast Asian realities. This shift from assigning refugee status to large groups to screening individuals on a case-by-case basis reflected larger changes occurring in the US immigration bureaucracy, the UNHCR and, by extension, international refugee norms. Although the Bush administration cautiously embraced the CPA, the

vociferous American objections to repatriation that accompanied Secretary of State Baker's pledge foreshadowed major debates ahead.

The Bush administration's framing of POW/MIA accounting marked a second shift in American policy that had profound consequences. As the confrontation between Bush and League members so vividly demonstrated, the high expectations that Reagan's 1983 keynote raised about the return of live POWs came back to haunt subsequent officials. As the FVPPA's stock continued to rise, the League began to fall out of official favor. In part, the League and its leader, Ann Mills-Griffiths, had attained such influence during the 1980s that it was almost inevitable that their grip on US policy (and policy makers) would weaken over time. The League's fall from grace accelerated during the Clinton years, in part due to an unlikely source: the MIA-advocate stacked congressional Select Committee on POW/MIA affairs.