Introduction

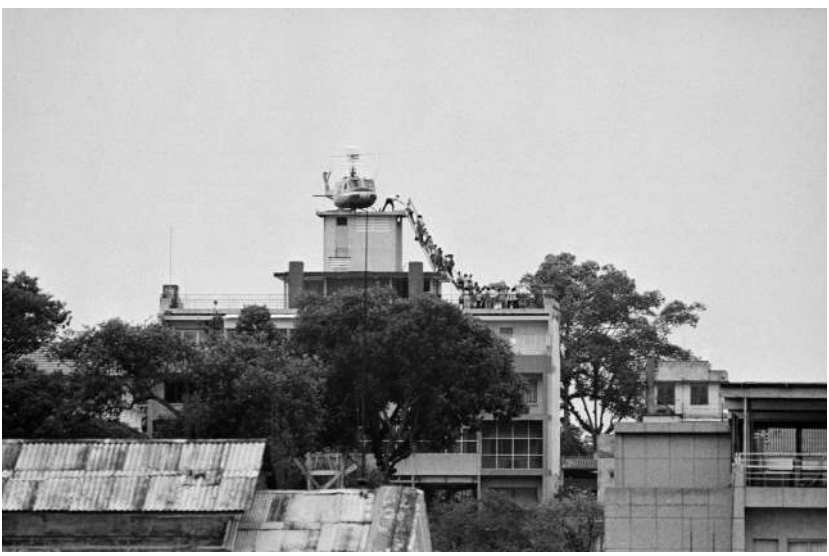

FIGURE 1 An American assists Vietnamese as part of the US evacuation of Saigon in late April 1975. [Image by Bettmann/Getty Images]

On April 29, 1975, Dutch photographer Hubert Van Es took an iconic photograph of events unfolding on the rooftop of 22 Gia Long Street in Saigon, South Vietnam (Figure 1). In the preceding two months, North Vietnamese troops had captured (or, depending on one's perspective, liberated) vast swaths of South Vietnamese territory in a stunningly successful military offensive. The next day, communist forces crashed through the gates at the presidential palace and raised their colors in a vivid display of Hanoi's victory. Van Es's snapshot captures one frame in this larger moment of systemic change: the chaotic and humiliating American evacuation of South Vietnam. That the last Americans frantically evacuated by helicopter dramatized the extent to which the United States failed to impose its will in Vietnam, despite preponderate economic, military, and geopolitical power. With the fall of Saigon, Indochina disappeared from the nightly

news and most Americans were eager to turn their attention elsewhere. US leaders refused to establish formal economic or diplomatic relations with the government of unified Vietnam, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), until the mid-1990s. In addition to symbolizing the end of the war, the photograph has become one of the quintessential representations of the limits of American power in the late twentieth century.

Another narrative has been hiding in plain sight, however. While the man standing on the rooftop reaching his arm out to potential passengers is an American, the majority of the people in the image, those waiting on the ladder and on the rooftop below, are South Vietnamese. It is obvious that they will not all fit in the helicopter. How would the American decide whom to board? What would happen to those left behind? More than presenting agonizing dilemmas for an individual American on April 29, 1975, these questions reverberated in Washington for decades. While usually synonymous with a resounding, emotional ending point, the image, in other ways, also captures the opening frame of a new saga. More than one million South Vietnamese resettled in the United States in the two decades after 1975, signaling a new phase in US-Vietnamese relations.[1]

Although South Vietnam ceased to exist politically, the alliance between the United States and the South Vietnamese people did not abruptly disappear. Nor, for that matter, did hostilities between Washington and Hanoi. For twenty years, the relations between the former foes stood at an uneasy status somewhere between war and peace. Understanding the end of the Vietnam War, I argue, requires one to acknowledge both processes: the resumption of official ties between Washington and Hanoi, what US officials called "normalization," *and* the policies and programs that facilitated one of the largest migrations of the late twentieth century. These processes were not merely simultaneous, they were mutually constitutive. Negotiating and implementing migration programs for South Vietnamese became the basis of normalization between Washington and Hanoi.

Normalization is a term that historical actors used constantly while rarely, if ever, providing a definition. Although much more work needs to be done to uncover the concept's origins as a tool of American foreign policy, it is clear that achieving normalization involved at least three things: developing formal economic relations, establishing formal diplomatic ties (i.e., exchanging ambassadors), and securing the ability to

respond to bilateral and international issues without major incident. While we tend to think of normalization as a moment – usually President William J. Clinton's announcement of the resumption of diplomatic relations on July 11, 1995 – it is more accurate to consider normalization as a nebulous process, one that took decades to unfold. Uncovering the American approach to US-SRV normalization is the main task of this book.

Normalization, in this case, was a postwar reconciliation process, but the narrative is not a linear story from war to peace. Recent advances in the study of both war and peace have demonstrated that neither category is as clear as it first appears. While it is a truism that wars are easy to begin and difficult to end, an interdisciplinary group of scholars has documented the many ways wars are not easy to contain; the sharp geographic, human, and temporal boundaries we affix to conflicts are often, in reality, hazy at best.[2] To make the matter even more complicated, the military outcome of a war is often not as decisive as the nonmilitary combat that follows. Writing the history of a war, remembering a war, and commemorating a war are often just as crucial to lasting victory as success on the battlefield.[3] While wars continue long after the fighting stops on paper, in hearts and minds, and in stone and granite, conflicts also persist in human displacement.[4] For those uprooted by war, migration is so deeply connected to armed conflict as to be inseparable from the war itself.

For many South Vietnamese, the Vietnam War persisted past 1975.[5] First, the war continued through the ongoing traumas of displacement and family separation. Second, in the official histories and popular narratives that (re)wrote the history of the war and commemorated the conflict, the South Vietnamese suffered from erasure in both the United States and SRV.[6] This project contributes to ongoing initiatives to redress this silence. I expand on existing efforts, spearheaded by critical refugee scholars, by demonstrating the ways the South Vietnamese people influenced international relations long after the collapse of the RVN state.

In addition to migrations and debates about the war's memory, the Vietnam War also endured beyond 1975 in other ways. Despite Hanoi's unequivocal military victory, the United States still exerted disproportionate power in international relations. American officials used Washington's global stature to perpetuate hostilities through nonmilitary means.[7] US policy makers expanded an embargo, which had formerly pertained only to North Vietnam, to the entire country and also refused to honor

President Richard Nixon's promise of billions of dollars in reconstruction aid. Washington also wielded its considerable international leverage to prevent Western financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund from lending to Hanoi. These decisions enabled the United States, even from a position of defeat, to deprive the SRV of direly needed external capital required to rebuild after decades of warfare.[8] As the United States waged nonmilitary battles with Hanoi, actual fighting between Vietnam and China and Vietnam and Cambodia – conflicts known collectively as the Third Indochina War – raged in Southeast Asia.[9] As war commenced between communist countries, US relations with China thawed considerably, culminating in the resumption of diplomatic relations in 1979.[10] The Third Indochina War and US-Chinese rapprochement reoriented US policy in Asia, prompting additional warlike policies from Washington. In response to the SRV's incursion into Cambodia and occupation of power in Phnom Penh, for instance, the United States led an international effort to politically and economically isolate Hanoi.

At first glance, the United States' resettlement of South Vietnamese migrants seems to conform to this larger pattern of continuing conflict with Hanoi after 1975. Like the majority of refugees admitted to the United States during the second half of the twentieth century, the South Vietnamese were fleeing a communist state, symbolically voting with their feet in the ongoing Cold War struggle.[11] In addition to this broader propaganda victory, the flight of such a large number of South Vietnamese also served as a substitute for military victory: the fact that so many of the nation's former allies would rather flee their homeland than live under Hanoi's rule validated, for some, President Ronald Reagan's claim that the Vietnam War had been a "noble cause" all along.[12] By drawing attention to the hardships faced by the South Vietnamese and implementing policies to "rescue" or "save" them, American officials perpetuated conflict between Washington and Hanoi.[13] This rescue narrative had profound consequences for Vietnamese American diasporic communities, who became rhetorically indebted to the United States and were expected to exhibit gratitude and perform their refugee identity in specific ways.[14]

As the war lingered beyond 1975, peace was especially elusive. Although we often conceive of peace as temporal – the time when war is absent – Mary Dudziak reminds us that it is not that simple.[15] Especially for Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when war has

been nearly perpetual, peace has been a "felt experience," a spatial rather than a temporal phenomenon.[16] The fact that most Americans, especially white Americans, can experience peace while their country wages war abroad is an important corrective to dismissing peace as a utopian ideal or thinking about peace as war's opposite. Understanding war and peace as entangled rather than opposed creates the space to understand the full complexity of normalization.[17] Normalization was a highly contested, paradoxical process where war and peace often coexisted.

The United States and SRV took steps toward postwar reconciliation, even as Washington implemented hostile policies. The incongruities between various aspects of American policy are decipherable only once we acknowledge that, even after the fall of Saigon, US officials treated the communist government in Hanoi and its South Vietnamese allies as distinct groups and implemented policies to address them both. Indeed, although the Republic of Vietnam ceased to exist, the tense relationships between the South Vietnamese people and the governments in Hanoi and Washington continued. As Long T. Bui and others have shown, South Vietnam persisted as a "ghost nation" whose history and people were "still unfolding . . . carried forth by the South Vietnamese diaspora and the refugees displaced by the war."[18] Although resettling South Vietnamese migrants might have, and sometimes did, inflame US-SRV hostilities, ultimately, negotiating and implementing migration programs thawed relations between Washington and Hanoi.

The United States could not secure the migration of South Vietnamese without SRV cooperation. Successful resolution of what US officials deemed "humanitarian issues" required regular contact and compromise between the former adversaries, which facilitated personal, governmental, and nongovernmental relationships established through regular meetings in Geneva, Hanoi, and New York City. These contacts were so extensive that by 1988 the US Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs asserted that "the United States has more contact with the Vietnamese on operational and policy levels than any other Western nation, including those which maintain diplomatic relations."[19] The tension between maintaining warlike policies, on the one hand, and demanding close collaboration, on the other, proved unsustainable. Negotiating and implementing policies to address humanitarian issues facilitated US-Vietnamese normalization.[20]

A fuller history of normalization invites us to reexamine the Vietnam War through new eyes. When reading the vast and constantly growing

histories of the war produced in the United States, it is impossible to overlook the pervasiveness of the question "Why Vietnam?" – that is, why did the United States devote so much blood and treasure in its failed attempt to secure the existence of a noncommunist South Vietnam?[21] This question has inspired a massive body of scholarship about the war's origins. The war's postscript, in contrast, has inspired far less scrutiny. While scholars have written extensively about the American withdrawal and the fateful events that occurred between the Peace of Paris Accords in 1973 and Hanoi's military victory in 1975, many accounts end abruptly in April 1975. Although the iconic photograph of the US evacuation is a tempting place to conclude histories of the conflict and pivot to exploring the war's memory, legacy, and lessons, it is imperative to continue examining US-Vietnamese relations after 1975.[22] The scope and complexity of the normalization process demand that historians interrogate the war's proctracted ending with the same suspicion and curiosity that they have afforded to the conflict's beginnings.

MIGRANTS AND US-VIETNAMESE NORMALIZATION

To make sense of the contradictions in the American approach to normalization, one must center the bilateral and multilateral migration programs that brought over one million South Vietnamese to the United States. Like the man standing on the Saigon rooftop on April 29, 1975, however, US officials had limited resources and had to make hard choices. Who, of South Vietnam's millions of people, did American policy makers view as most deserving of resettlement in the United States? To what extent did making these types of decisions perpetuate the paternalism and animosity that often characterized US policies toward South Vietnam during the war years? At the same time, how did implementing migration programs open a new chapter of relations between the American and South Vietnamese peoples? Ultimately, US officials prioritized three groups of South Vietnamese: those among the "boat people" with familial and/or wartime connections to the United States; those incarcerated in Hanoi's reeducation camps, especially members of the ARVN; and the 30,000–50,000 Amerasians, or children of American servicemen and Vietnamese women, who remained in Vietnam after 1975.

Approximately 130,000 South Vietnamese evacuated Saigon with American personnel in April 1975. Immediately thereafter, others continued to flee. Many departed in unseaworthy vessels and faced unpredictable waters, pirates, and starvation during their journeys, migrants the

world called "boat people."[23] Still others, known as "land people," fled communist control of Vietnam and neighboring countries through dangerous overland routes that often required traversing mountainous terrain, completing daring river crossings, and successfully navigating through minefields. These exoduses were the result of both individual decisions made by hundreds of thousands of nonstate actors and forced expulsion policies. Ultimately, 1.3 million oceanic and overland migrants successfully reached the shores of first asylum nations between 1975 and 1995. Of these, the United States resettled 822,977, or just over 63 percent, including 424,590 Vietnamese, 248,147 Laotians, and 150,240 Cambodians.[24] Although the diaspora included others, I focus primarily, though not exclusively, on Vietnamese migrants who resettled in the United States, given my primary interest in US-Vietnamese normalization.

The number of Vietnamese who resettled in the United States far exceeded the original 130,000 evacuees and the nearly 425,000 overland and oceanic migrants. An additional half million emigrated directly from Vietnam to the United States through a multilateral initiative known as the Orderly Departure Program (ODP).[25] The 500,000 persons who traveled through the ODP included those with ties to the United States who would have otherwise fled as "boat people," including Amerasians, former reeducation camp detainees, and their close family members.[26] Between 1975 and 1995, then, over one million Vietnamese resettled in the United States, and over two thousand refugees per year were still arriving annually on American shores in the early twenty-first century through the vestiges of war-related migration programs.[27]

There was nothing inevitable about American officials' decision to admit South Vietnamese migrants for more than two decades following the RVN's collapse. Both long-standing trends in US law and the immediate historical context stood as obstacles to the resettlement of such a large Asian migrant population. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the 1924 Quota Act, and racially defined naturalization laws largely prohibited Asians from legally immigrating to the United States or obtaining American citizenship until the mid-twentieth century.[28] The US-Philippine War, the ferocity of US-Japanese combat during WWII, Japanese American Internment, and wars in Korea and Vietnam all reinforced this deep-seated racial animus by dehumanizing Asians as others and enemies.[29] These precedents, and Americans' eagerness to wash their hands of Indochina after 1975, combined to pose significant barriers to entry for South Vietnamese. Although US policy makers looked favorably on refugees fleeing communism throughout the Cold War, the

Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal discredited so many of the assumptions underpinning US foreign policy that anticommunism alone does not satisfactorily explain why American policy makers made an immediate commitment to resettle South Vietnamese in 1975 and steadily expanded that commitment for twenty years.

The vast majority of the South Vietnamese who resettled in the United States did so through special programs that operated outside normal channels. The Refugee Act of 1980, inspired in large part by the United States' inability to respond effectively to the early surge in the diaspora, was the first stand-alone refugee law of the twentieth century. Throughout the 1980s, American policy makers consistently earmarked over half of the available admissions slots for Indochinese refugees. The majority of South Vietnamese who arrived in the United States, however, resettled through programs that required additional legislation and/or bilateral or multilateral agreements. In addition to more than five separate paroles in the second half of the 1970s, South Vietnamese also emigrated via the 1979 Orderly Departure Program, the 1982 Amerasian Immigration Act, the 1987 Amerasian Homecoming Act, the 1989 Humanitarian Operation (a special program for former reeducation camp detainees), the 1989 Comprehensive Plan of Action, the 1996 Resettlement Opportunities for Vietnamese Returnees, and the 1996 McCain Amendment. Implementing these programs involved intensive negotiations between American officials and their SRV counterparts. These policies were also premised on assumptions about the exceptionality of the relationship between the American and South Vietnamese peoples, what President Gerald Ford described as a "profound moral obligation."[30] Even as Washington and Hanoi resumed formal economic and diplomatic relations in the mid-1990s, American officials continued to create special channels for their South Vietnamese allies to resettle in the United States.

While the more than one million Vietnamese who resettled in the United States in the twenty years after the fall of Saigon are commonly referred to as *refugees*, they actually occupied a variety of legal categories. Vietnamese *migrants* – a term I use to connote, simply, people on the move – assumed an assortment of legal statuses, including refugee, parolee, immigrant, and screened-out refugee. International law during this period, which derived from the 1951 Refugee Convention as amended by the 1967 Protocol, defined a refugee as any individual "outside the country of his nationality" and unable to return due to "a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of

a particular social group or political opinion."[31] This narrow definition does not encompass the much broader, colloquial use of the term refugee to refer to individuals compelled to flee, even if they remain in their home country or flee for reasons not included in the UN definition, such as natural disasters.[32] If popular usage far outpaces the legal definition, scholars have documented the extent to which the term refugee indicates more than a legal status.[33] As Mimi Thi Nguyen explains, "the refugee" is "a historical event, a legal classification, an existential condition of suspension or surrender . . . and a focal point for rescue or rehabilitation."[34] While I am deeply indebted to the scholars who have theorized and problematized the concept of refugee, in the pages that follow I use the term in a strictly legal sense unless otherwise noted. US and SRV officials vociferously debated whether or not Vietnamese migrants formally qualified as refugees. These disagreements involved far more than semantics.[35] The ability to apply a specific label and persuade the international community that the label was correct became one of the many means through which Washington and Hanoi clashed, cooperated, and fought for credibility on the world stage after 1975.

The full extent of the Indochinese diaspora and its impact on US-Vietnamese normalization during these decades has, hitherto, largely been overshadowed. During the same years that over one million South Vietnamese resettled in the United States, the American public's attention remained fixated on a much smaller cohort: the 2,500 US servicemen listed as prisoners of war/missing in action (POW/MIA). Of all the issues that influenced US-SRV normalization, none rivaled the attention that the American people devoted to the effort to determine the fate of every American who served in the Vietnam War and bring them (or their remains) back to the United States. This campaign was known as the effort to provide a "full accounting" of missing American servicemen.[36] After US troops left Vietnam in 1973, the belief that Hanoi continued to hold live American prisoners against their will and that the US government, either out of negligence, incompetence, or subterfuge, refused to bring them home gripped the American public consciousness. Public opinion polls taken in April 1993, for example, revealed that 67 percent of respondents believed that there were Americans "still being held in Southeast Asia."[37] Yet, for all of the fanfare, public recognition, and expenditure of governmental resources the full accounting effort inspired, POW/MIAs were only one of multiple groups that occupied a prominent place on the US government's agenda vis-à-vis Vietnam. Migration programs for South Vietnamese not only occurred alongside the POW/MIA

campaign; US officials linked these causes by defining them as family-reunification based humanitarian issues. Collaboration on humanitarian issues facilitated normalization.

NORMALIZATION AND NONEXECUTIVE ACTORS

Labeling migration programs and POW/MIA accounting as "humanitarian" concerns evoked a long history of humanitarian action. Generally speaking, scholars define humanitarianism as an impulse to assist those suffering beyond the nation's borders.[38] While misery emanates from many places, war and its concomitant hardships have consistently attracted relief efforts.[39] In the wake of WWI, humanitarian aid became an important pillar of US foreign relations, and the sheer scope and scale of the horrors of WWII accelerated those trends by prompting the professionalization and globalization of humanitarian organizations.[40] The massive financial resources and logistical coordination required to provide assistance on a global scale prompted ever-closer relationships between large humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross and the US government.[41] By the 1970s, humanitarian organizations had amassed a good deal of moral capital, credibility born from a long history of assisting vulnerable populations in often dangerous situations. At the same time, because the large, well-established humanitarian agencies became increasingly reliant on government dollars, these organizations took great pains to emphasize their independence and insisted that they, and their causes, were nonpolitical.[42] This rhetoric of apolitical morality played a prominent role in US-SRV normalization.

So did human rights. In comparison to humanitarianism, the idea that every individual possesses universal human rights is of much more recent vintage. Human rights became enshrined in global geopolitics with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). As humanitarian workers were triaging the bloodletting of World War II, the newly formed United Nations codified the UDHR and a series of other international accords and conventions in an attempt to thwart future catastrophe, efforts collectively constituting a "human rights revolution."[43] While human rights were powerfully articulated in the 1940s, in the 1970s grassroots actors and transnational NGOs pushed governments to put the words enshrined decades prior into action. This surge of activism elevated human rights to a place of greater prominence and permeance in international relations.[44] The diffusion of human rights rhetoric and activism echoed powerfully in Washington, where Congress and then the