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Expanding the US Agenda

In 1977, a group of South Vietnamese women gathered in the home of Khuc Minh Tho in Falls Church, Virginia.[1] The women formed, in Tho's words, "a support group of wives and family members" who all suffered the same fate: separation from their husbands, brothers, and sons, who Hanoi had imprisoned in reeducation camps. This group, which eventually formed the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association, began in almost the exact same fashion as the League of Wives had a decade prior.[2] The families of POWs and reeducation camp detainees shared more than male relatives who fought for the same side in the Vietnam War: both groups saw their families torn apart by the conflict as Hanoi incarcerated their loved ones in camps. Members of the nascent League of Wives and the FVPPA, meanwhile, were left to cope with the trauma of family separation while their husbands' statuses remained in doubt and largely unknown.[3] While desperate to secure their loved ones' release and see their families united, both groups of women knew they would need the support of the US government if they were going to achieve their goals. While the League of Wives had been superseded by the National League of POW/MIA Families and had changed drastically since the 1960s, the need for US government assistance continued into the 1980s: both POW/MIA and reeducation camp advocates required US government assistance if they were going to see their families reunited.

By the end of President Ronald Reagan's first term, the US government had professed its commitment not only to POW/MIAs and reeducation camp detainees but also Amerasians, the children of American servicemen and Vietnamese women. On January 28, 1983, President Ronald Reagan

declared "the return of all POWs, the fullest possible accounting for the still missing, and the repatriation" of their remains to be "the highest national priority."[4] In September 1984, Secretary of State George Shultz characterized reeducation camp detainees and Amerasians as "pressing refugee problems" and announced the creation of "two new initiatives" to provide for their migration to the United States.[5] In stark contrast to the oceanic and overland migrants who fled Indochina, POW/MIAs, reeducation camp prisoners, and Amerasians all suffered (or were thought to suffer) *inside* Vietnam. A heightened focus on individuals within the SRV and a willingness, even eagerness, to criticize Hanoi's internal affairs became the hallmarks of US policy toward Vietnam in the early 1980s.

The 1980 election saw Reagan lambaste Carter for what the former California Governor argued were an array of foreign policy failures, especially the president's inability to secure the release of American hostages held in Iran. The botched attempt to rescue the hostages in April of 1980 represented "rock bottom" for the US military, which, in the wake of the Vietnam War, was already viewed by many Americans with a combination of derision and disgust.[6] Reagan, however, did not share the commonly held, overwhelmingly negative view of the US armed forces. Rather, Andrew Bacevich explains, the actor turned politician "categorically rejected what in the wake of Vietnam had become the prevailing wisdom about war, soldiers, and the contemporary American military experience."[7] As a presidential candidate, Reagan made his rejection of prevailing ways of thinking about the Vietnam War and the US military hallmarks of his campaign. On August 17, 1980, during a speech accepting the Veterans of Foreign Wars' endorsement, he famously dubbed American involvement in the Vietnam War a "noble cause" and argued that veterans who served in that conflict "deserve our gratitude, our respect, and our continuing concern."[8] In his first years in office, the president consistently echoed these themes, making the proud, venerated American soldier "the preeminent icon of the Reagan recovery."[9]

Reagan's unapologetic patriotism, substantive investment in the armed forces, and casting of the American soldier as a national hero reverberated in US society and American policy in important ways. Regarding US-SRV relations, the president's approach had at least two major consequences. First, the rising esteem with which Americans held veterans opened even more space for elected officials who had served in the Vietnam War to become prominent voices in the US-SRV normalization process. Second, Reagan's Vietnam War revisionism infused public and official urgency into the cause of missing American servicemen. It is revealing, for instance,

that it was Reagan himself, in the keynote address at the League's annual meeting, who dubbed the POW/MIA accounting to be "the highest national priority," while Schultz, the Secretary of State, spoke on behalf of the administration regarding reeducation camp detainees and Amerasians. While migration programs for South Vietnamese never garnered as much presidential attention or public awareness as POW/MIA accounting, those programs nevertheless played instrumental roles in the normalization process.

Despite the intensity with which Reagan criticized Carter's foreign policy during the 1980 campaign, the Great Communicator actually kept various aspects of Carter's policies intact.[10] One of the most surprising areas of continuity was human rights. Although Reagan's campaign suggested he would roll back the previous administration's attempt to institutionalize human rights, congressional insistence forced the president to change his approach.[11] As early as 1981, the administration embraced what Rasmus Søndergaard describes as a "conservative human rights policy."[12] Reagan also built on and expanded several important Carter-era precedents. Both presidents maintained that talks on the status of economic and diplomatic relations could not resume until Hanoi withdrew its troops from Cambodia and participated in finding a "political solution" (satisfactory to US officials) in Phnom Penh, a condition that suspended formal negotiations until 1991.

The United States also continued to fulfill the promises Vice President Walter Mondale made at the 1979 Geneva Conference. The executive and legislative branches, working collaboratively as required by the Refugee Act of 1980, consistently earmarked more than 50 percent of annual refugee admissions slots for Indochinese throughout the 1980s.[13] While the total number of refugees admitted decreased each year, reflecting continued concern about the financial and political implications of refugee admissions, the percentage of available slots American officials awarded to the Indochinese remained consistent, even though the departures decreased but did not cease. US policy makers continued to privilege resettlement as a major American response to the Indochinese diaspora throughout the 1980s.

The US-led international effort to isolate Hanoi also continued.[14] In addition to imposing a unilateral embargo on the SRV, American officials used the United States' considerable geopolitical leverage to prevent international financial institutions from lending to Hanoi. American policy makers also spearheaded political isolation of the SRV by chastising Hanoi for its presence in Cambodia and critiquing the SRV's internal

policies that, US officials argued, included forced expulsion and creating conditions that prompted large numbers to flee. Reagan's emphasis on populations within Vietnam, therefore, was a logical outgrowth of previous policy choices, even if it also bore unmistakable trademarks of the new executive's larger approach.

Nearly every scholar who has written about the administration's embrace of POW/MIA accounting and migration programs argues that these causes bolstered the president's efforts to depict world affairs as a battle between a beneficent United States and a belligerent, monolithic communism.[15] The charge that the SRV continued to hold live Americans prisoner (or refused to give their remains to grieving families), oppressed Amerasians, and detained reeducation camp detainees without charges or trial bolstered Reagan's claims about Vietnam, a country he referred to in his diary as "that d – n Communist sink hole."[16] Each issue also reinforced the president's domestic agenda. While allocating high numbers of refugee admission slots to South Vietnamese did not win the president any popularity points, emphasizing family reunification was a political winner. Reagan, who cultivated an image of "the family man par excellence," celebrated the heterosexual nuclear family while on the campaign trail and once in the White House.[17] Although this family ideal was hotly contested, the Republican party's rhetoric about a return to "family values" aligned with the president's foreign policy prerogatives to make policies that underwrote family reunification for Americans and South Vietnamese even more appealing.

By adding individuals inside Vietnam to the purview of US policy making, however, American officials broadened the scope of the ongoing US-SRV dialogue. Because Amerasians, reeducation camp prisoners, and the remains of missing American servicemen all traveled to the United States through distinct programs and because each group had different nongovernmental advocates lobbying on its behalf, scholars have tended to study these cohorts in isolation. That the administration publicly proclaimed its support for these causes in 1983 and 1984, however, was not a coincidence of timing. To understand US policy making and appreciate the full extent of ongoing US-Vietnamese relations during these years, one must study US policy regarding Amerasians, reeducation camp detainees, and POW/MIAs as they were implemented: collectively.

American policy makers not only announced new policies for each of these concerns concurrently but also linked them as "humanitarian issues." Indeed, US officials used the label "humanitarian" to connote a very specific set of issues – migration programs for South Vietnamese

and POW/MIA accounting – vis-à-vis Vietnam. On the one hand, this approach drew on a long history of labeling refugees and soldiers as groups of humanitarian concern in a postwar setting.[18] At the same time, the designation and especially subsequent advocacy reflected the specific historical moment of the late twentieth century, when nonstate actors and US government officials conflated and combined human rights and humanitarianism in ways that steadily eroded the boundaries between the two. With regard to US-SRV normalization, American officials demanded that Hanoi divide "humanitarian" from "political" considerations, while at the same time making it clear that failure to resolve humanitarian concerns would have severe political consequences. In theory, these issues had high propaganda value in the United States' ongoing war with Hanoi. In practice, however, the United States' determination to expand US-SRV dialogue to include humanitarian concerns ultimately fostered cooperation and compromise, which facilitated normalization.

The burgeoning, global human rights movement and the moral power human rights rhetoric and activists wielded by the 1980s played a vital role in the evolution of the American definition of "humanitarian" as it applied to US-SRV relations. Human rights scholar Kenneth Cmiel notes that, at its core, "human rights politics was a politics of information" and "a politics of images."[19] As the CCIR had before them, POW/MIA, Amerasian, and reeducation advocates all engaged in information and image politics by mobilizing new evidence during the early 1980s that helped make their causes more visible and compelling. Although Reagan was more prone to support campaigns focused on individuals within Vietnam than his predecessor, nongovernmental advocacy mattered a great deal, especially in the vitally important arena of public opinion. To fully appreciate the way these trends coalesced during Reagan's first term, however, one must first acknowledge nonstate actors' failed attempts to precipitate policy responses to Amerasians, reeducation camp prisoners, and missing American servicemen during the 1970s. It is to those earlier efforts that this chapter first turns.

UNSUCCESSFUL ADVOCACY EFFORTS DURING THE 1970S

While precise figures are impossible to determine, scholars estimate that when the last American helicopters left Saigon in April 1975, 30,000–50,000 Amerasians remained in Vietnam.[20] This sizable number of American offspring vividly demonstrates that the intimate ties between the US and South Vietnamese, which were almost always asymmetrical

and violent, far outlasted the collapse of the RVN. Amerasians faced considerable hardship, especially after 1975. As Mary Kim DeMonaco argues, Vietnamese Amerasians suffered from a "triple stigma."[21] First, Amerasians were fatherless in a highly patriarchal society. The consequences of fatherlessness were profound: "because nationality, race, and personal identity derive from the father in Vietnamese society," many Vietnamese Amerasians lived incredibly difficult lives as social outcasts derogatorily called *bui doi*, "children of dust."[22] Second, a long-standing Vietnamese prejudice against mixed-race peoples – coupled with the fact that many Amerasians were easily identified – meant many Vietnamese also viewed Amerasians as *my lai* (a pejorative term for half-Vietnamese, half-American).[23] Finally, the fact that these fatherless, mixed-race children were the offspring of Americans meant that they were also the "living legacy" of the enemy in what the victorious Vietnamese called the American War.[24] Thus Amerasians and their families suffered social chastisement and discrimination resulting from a combination of official policy, long-held customs, and recent geopolitics.

Amerasians undoubtedly occupied a very difficult position in the SRV and were derided by the government in Hanoi; although some were abandoned, however, many Amerasians grew up with their maternal family units intact.[25] Thus, despite media outlets' tendency to depict Amerasians as "orphans," many had firmly established family ties, even as they endured considerable adversity. More than an incidental oversight, Jodi Kim demonstrates the extent to which the erasure of birth mothers and the depiction of Asian children as orphans are "enabling fictions" that "obscure the material reasons why so many children in regions throughout the world – particularly those facing a US military or missionary presence – are socially orphaned or made available for adoption in the first place."[26] Like dividing the larger post-1975 migrations from the war itself, the myth of orphaned Amerasians allowed US officials to sidestep uncomfortable realities about US policy causing humanitarian crises rather than simply responding to them.

The United States initially rejected the idea that it had any obligations to Amerasians. During the long tenure of American military presence in Asia, US officials actively discouraged marriages between American GIs and Asian women, and most Amerasian children were born outside of wedlock.[27] Even though they were the children of American fathers, Amerasians did not receive US citizenship. Historian Sabrina Thomas notes that the bestowing of citizenship to those born outside of the territorial United States "was and is an intentionally gendered process,"

as "illegitimate children born abroad to US mothers and foreign fathers" automatically receive US citizenship, while the illegitimate children of American fathers and foreign mothers do not.[28] Amerasians thus suffered from an odd paradox; nearly everyone agreed that they were the children of Americans, but US law prohibited them from enjoying any of the rights that status might bestow. Because both Hanoi and Washington rejected responsibility for Vietnamese Amerasians, Thomas argues this cohort was "effectively stateless."[29]

Efforts to bring Vietnamese Amerasians to the United States during the late 1970s foundered. These initiatives proved unsuccessful, in large part, because advocates based their argument on the premise that Amerasians *should* receive American citizenship and therefore tried to challenge existing legal practices. This approach ran into a minefield of obstacles. US law, strongly supported by the Department of Defense, mandated that "no individual in the military service will be required or requested to admit paternity" of illegitimate children fathered abroad.[30] Furthermore, because of fears of communist reprisals, most South Vietnamese mothers destroyed any evidence which might have substantiated specific paternity claims.[31] Amerasians, therefore, could not immigrate to the United States through family reunification preference categories and instead had to apply under the lowest preference class, "other qualified immigrants."[32] Because the number of applicants far outpaced the number of available spaces in the late 1970s, as the overland and oceanic migrations reached their peak, it was nearly impossible for Amerasians to travel to the United States.

Some criticized US migration policies – which brought large numbers of Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians to the US while effectively barring those with American fathers – as having a backward prioritization. The Carter administration, however, refused to support any legislation regarding Amerasians, arguing that such efforts would place an onerous burden on an already overstretched Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and prohibitively expand the high and constantly growing costs of Indochinese resettlement.[33] Given Carter's initial disinclination to address what contemporaries called the "Indochinese refugee crisis," even as the conditions drew repeated comparisons to the Holocaust, it is unsurprising that the administration did not award Amerasians, a group with virtually no publicity, a high priority.

The US government also responded with silence to another, far more numerous group of individuals inside Vietnam: reeducation camp prisoners.[34] Reeducation camp detainees drew little external attention

immediately after the fall of Saigon. The reasons for this are multifaceted. At the most basic level, reliable information was scarce.[35] The professional journalists who provided on-the-ground reporting in other Asian countries like South Korea were simply absent from the SRV as Hanoi expulsed all but a few foreign correspondents, a trend that was even more pronounced in neighboring Cambodia.[36] This lack of information suited many Americans, who after 1975 were eager to focus their attention elsewhere. For the few who remained interested and invested in the region, the genocide in Cambodia and the life and death stakes faced by oceanic and overland migrants made what little was known of reeducation camps seem mild by comparison. Finally, it is likely that Hanoi's promise of a maximum three-year sentence seemed reasonable to many who expected US government warnings of a large scale "bloodbath" to come true. The existence of reeducation camps and the lives of those detained therein thus remained underreported, overshadowed, and unable to inspire the sympathy necessary for external intervention.[37]

There were, however, noteworthy exceptions. By the 1970s, Amnesty International (AI) was probably the best-known human rights NGO in the world. AI officials regularly documented what they viewed as human rights violations occurring in the SRV's reeducation camps.[38] In its 1977 International Report, AI devoted seven pages to the SRV and argued "the most important issue remained the large-scale detention in 're-education' camps of civilian and military personnel of the former Saigon administration."[39] Amnesty reported that "some observers" estimated the reeducation camp population to be 200,000 at the end of 1976, while in February 1977 Vietnamese officials put the figure at 50,000.[40]

This discrepancy between the SRV's official figures and estimates from outside sources persisted throughout the camps' existence. Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that Hanoi refused to publish the reeducation camp prisoners' names and often moved inmates, which made accurate record keeping difficult. Moreover, broadly speaking, the camps had two different populations: those the SRV interned immediately in 1975 or 1976, including high-ranking officials of the Republic of Vietnam, and those Hanoi imprisoned in the late 1970s or 1980s. This second category included a broad range of individuals such as political dissidents and criminals. Rather than steadily declining, then, the total reeducation camp population remained in flux. More importantly, Hanoi refused – and of this writing still refuses – to declassify the relevant records, which has rendered all external figures best-guess estimates. As the AI report conceded, "little is known . . . about most of these camps."[41]

Most of AI's 1977 report focused on individuals the organization dubbed as prisoners of conscience (POC).[42] AI's mandate maintained very strict requirements for POC status. To qualify, one must "have not advocated or used violence" and "been imprisoned for political reasons."[43] This definition limited Amnesty's advocacy on behalf of reeducation camp prisoners, as many of those still detained in 1977 – and the majority of those who served the longest terms – were high-ranking ARVN members who had, by definition, "advocated" and "used" violence. Thus, while AI remained the primary NGO documenting issue throughout the late 1970s, many of the reeducation camp detainees fell outside of the organization's purview.[44]

As the 1970s drew to a close, information about the camps modestly increased from two sources, which painted disparate pictures of what was occurring in the SRV. Hanoi permitted "several Western newsmen and church representatives" to visit "one or two of the camps," and these observers suggested that conditions in the camps were "adequate."[45] One visitor even went as far as to suggest that the camp she toured in 1979 "looked as though it could have been a small tropical resort."[46] Most Hanoi-approved observers suggested that while not desirable, reeducation was the lesser of two evils, as it seemed "to have headed off a wave of vengeance and served as an effective tradeoff avoiding the bloodbath that was predicted."[47] Others argued that because human rights were "viewed differently" in Vietnam, Western definitions were not an appropriate measure of Hanoi's progress.[48] AI's commitment to impartiality and its self-avowed "non-political" nature prohibited it from lobbying government officials to accept or act on its report. Thus, despite AI's prominence by the late 1970s, the individuals and organizations who were sympathetic to the SRV were much more vocal.

While the number of foreign observers who could provide accounts of Hanoi's reeducation camps increased in 1978, so too did refugee testimonies. The sharp increase in the numbers of oceanic migrants offered an alternative perspective and provided "a very different view of Vietnamese life."[49] Many cited "the potential threat of being sent off to a NEZ [New Economic Zone] or reeducation camp" as the reason for their decision to flee.[50] The differences between outside observers' accounts (with AI as the sole exception) and refugee descriptions foreshadowed a much larger debate: were those exiting the SRV refugees fleeing persecution or migrants choosing to leave "adequate" conditions?

For the most part, this question went unasked during the late 1970s. The sheer size of the oceanic exodus, widespread recognition of Hanoi's

complicity in the forced migration of its ethnic-Chinese population, and frequent comparisons to the Holocaust made questions about refugee status moot. There were some, however, who sought to document why so many Vietnamese chose to abandon the land of their ancestors and chance an extraordinarily dangerous journey to escape. In February 1979, what began as a "study group" on human rights issues among politically active women in Northern California became Humanitas International, a "non-political, non-partisan, non-profit corporation," aimed at "educating the public to human rights violations."[51] Humanitas consciously sought to differentiate itself from other groups like the powerful Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees by focusing on "the roots of the problem" – that is, "to learn what is causing the people to flee."[52] Humanitas' two most important members were President Joan Baez and Vice President Ginetta Sagan. Baez was an activist, an internationally known folk singer, and future member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Sagan, meanwhile, was a prominent leader in the budding US human rights movement. Both women had been working together for over a decade to advance the cause of human rights, a mission that became Sagan's life's work.

Wielding an unusual combination of fund-raising ability, organizational prowess, and experience working in the field of human rights, Sagan and Baez made an impressive pair as the leadership of Humanitas International. Three months after its founding in 1979, Humanitas sponsored a full-page "Open Letter" to the SRV in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and other papers. The letter lambasted Hanoi for its reeducation camp policy and asserted that the camps were "overflowing" and that "people disappear and never return."[53] The letter, based on interviews Sagan conducted with refugees, suggested that detainees were "fed a starvation diet of stale rice, forced to squat bound wrist to ankle" and were "used as human mine detectors, clearing live mine fields with their hands and feet."[54] The surge in oceanic and overland departures in the months immediately following the Open Letter, however – the worst months, numerically speaking, of the migration – overshadowed any potential impact the publication might have had.

After the Open Letter, Baez and Sagan began pursuing different paths. Baez and Humanitas as an organization, despite their original intentions, shifted the preponderant amount of their attention to advocating on behalf of overland and oceanic migrants, likely viewing the life and death stakes on the high seas and the Thai-Cambodian border as far more urgent than a study of internal SRV conditions. Although never

exercising a voice as influential as the CCIR, Baez exerted a great deal of personal effort to help convince Carter to send the Seventh Fleet to help rescue oceanic migrants in peril.[55] She also personally visited refugee camps in Thailand, always with news cameras in tow, which raised funds and awareness for Cambodian survivors.[56] Thus, in many ways, Baez pursued the channels that let her use her greatest asset, her celebrity, to focus popular and policy makers' attention on those fleeing Indochina. Sagan, meanwhile, continued to work toward their original goal of creating a report on internal SRV conditions and, to that end, used her transnational connections and language skills to conduct interviews with former reeducation camp prisoners in the United States and Europe.

The attempts by nongovernmental advocates to mobilize the US bureaucracy into action on behalf of Amerasians and reeducation camp detainees during the late 1970s mostly failed, insofar as these efforts did not lead to major policy changes. These unsuccessful efforts, however, reveal some of the enduring dynamics between nonstate advocates and their allies in the US government. Overwhelmingly, nonexecutive actors were women advocating on platforms of family reunification and the observance of human rights, while the elected officials whose support they needed were men. Each occupant of the White House between 1975 and 1995 was male. While women were not completely excluded from Congress, their representation throughout the 1980s was paltry. The 96th Congress, which convened from 1979 to 1981, had one female senator and sixteen representatives, which made women's representation on Capitol Hill a dismal 3 percent.[57] This status quo dominated throughout the decade: the 100th Congress (1987–1989) had two female senators and twenty-three representatives, bringing women's representation up to 4.7 percent.[58] Sagan's personal experiences reveal a great deal about how these dynamics functioned in practice.

After surviving imprisonment and torture during World War II, Sagan immigrated to the United States and became a leading figure in the nascent American human rights movement. She founded Amnesty International's West Coast branch in 1968, and under her leadership AIUSA's West Coast presence grew precipitously. From 1970 to 1976, the number of "local chapters" of AIUSA expanded from two to over one hundred.[59] This expansion, Barbara Keys explains, "was powered in large part by its West Coast branch, which by 1974 claimed more than half of the country's members."[60] Sagan's contemporaries credited her efforts, which reached as far south as Houston and at least as far east as Detroit, with this success.[61] As one of her fellow activists and future West Coast

Director of AI recalled, "she really is the one who got Amnesty International off the ground in this country."[62] Sagan's recruitment of well-known celebrities, "instinctive media savvy," and her "successful direct mail operation" led to the West Coach branch's stunning success.[63]

While Sagan's innovative recruitment methods mattered, so did gender politics. As Key notes, the gender divide among AIUSA's leadership played out regionally: "men predominated in New York; in California women ran the show."[64] Allies like San Francisco philanthropist Sally Lilienthal and Baez helped dramatically with Sagan's successful recruitment and fund-raising efforts.[65] As a homemaker and mother of three, moreover, Sagan began the West Coast chapter of AIUSA in 1968 in the space she had: her home. Like the League of Wives, then, AIUSA's West Coast chapter began under the leadership of a highly motivated housewife who recruited like-minded women to meet and organize in domestic spaces. The Sagan family home in Atherton quickly became, according to the *Los Angeles Times,* "a kind of nerve center for efforts to improve the lot of political prisoners everywhere."[66] Even after the West Coast branch had enough resources to establish a formal office, Sagan's household, especially her massive marble-topped kitchen table, continued to serve as a "satellite office" and epicenter of activism.[67]

Ginetta Sagan, like Sybil Stockdale before her and Khuc Minh Tho after her, was therefore quite literally what Lisa McGirr has called a "'kitchen-table' activist."[68] In her *Suburban Warriors*, McGirr demonstrates the women in the conservative movement organized from their homes and, when necessary, went door to door to gain support for their cause. "'Kitchen-table' activists," McGirr persuasively argues, "have fundamentally shaped the course of American politics."[69] As evidenced by Stockdale, Sagan, and Tho's activism, they have also influenced US foreign relations.

In addition to occupying spaces and roles typically designated as "female" in American society (wife, mother, housewife) and collaborating with fellow women, Sagan also possessed physical characteristics and personal traits that accented her femininity. Sagan's contemporaries often drew attention to the contrast between her height (she was just under five feet tall) and the magnitude of her accomplishments. Sagan's biography on the Women's International Center website, for example, suggests: "Yes, she may be diminutive in stature, but she is a Giant."[70] In a society where cultural productions almost always depict men as taller than their female counterparts, it is likely that Sagan was often the shortest person in the room. To add to the femininity American society inscribed

on women of Sagan's height, she also harbored many of the qualities that the American public celebrated and expected from women: cheerfulness and selflessness. Those who knew Sagan described her as an "ebullient, feisty, smiling woman,"[71] a "laughing, lifting person,"[72] "with the spirit and energy of a hummingbird,"[73] a "woman with a sunlight smile"[74] who stayed "relentlessly cheerful,"[75] even when diagnosed with cancer later in life.[76] As Sagan aged, reports regularly described her as a "bubbling grandmother" or as having a "grandmotherly appearance."[77] Philip L. Geyelin, a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist, characterized Sagan as one of those "high-minded, hardheaded people who refuse to give up hope," someone who "is tough-minded as she is compassionate, bright-spirited and witty."[78] Finally, throughout her years as an activist, Sagan was known "universally by only her first name," a trend that continues to characterize female politicians and celebrities in the twenty-first century.[79]

While Sagan championed the universal and the human, it is clear that her contemporaries and the few scholars that have written about her have understood her through a gendered lens. Keys describes Sagan as someone who "might have stepped out of the pages of Betty Friedan's 1963 block-buster *The Feminine Mystique:* a college-educated suburban housewife and mother, in search of greater meaning in life."[80] Historians have shown how women, from the founding of the republic to the present day – as "revolutionary mothers," "social housekeepers," or "'kitchen-table' activists" – have mobilized their identities as women and mothers to claim moral authority inside and outside of the home. Ginetta Sagan did not verbalize this tradition; rather, she consistently championed the universal and the human, perspectives that were foundational to human rights advocacy during the period. Nevertheless, Sagan clearly benefitted from long-standing precedents that predisposed Americans to see women, especially mothers, as a moral force.

And morality in US foreign policy, especially with regard to the SRV, was direly needed in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. As Christian Appy and others have noted, the US military was so destructive, US officials so deceptive, the US public so disgusted that "the Vietnam War compelled millions of citizens to question the once widely held faith that their country is the greatest force for good in the world, that it always acts to advance democracy and human rights, that it is superior in both its power and its virtue."[81] In 1971, almost 60 percent of Americans "concluded that the war in Vietnam was not just a mistake, but immoral."[82] While not all US policy makers shared this conviction, the palpable disillusionment

among the American public was something that elected officials could not ignore. "The convergence of discourse between humanitarianism and human rights," Jana Lipman observes, "provided a small window" for redefinition.[83] As US officials attempted to chart a course forward after 1975, especially with regard to US-SRV relations, an emphasis on humanitarian issues championed by women seeking reunification with their loved ones and the observance of human rights was, relatively speaking, a safe way to proceed. Just as women like Ginetta Sagan and Khuc Minh Tho needed the power of the US government to compel Hanoi to release reeducation camp detainees and permit them to travel to the United States, American officials also benefitted from the moral authority these women bestowed upon US policy. While the relative need between female nonstate actors and male officials was always asymmetrical, the mutual benefit these relationships afforded helps explain the close personal ties that developed among nonexecutive actors.

THE POLITICS OF INFORMATION AND IMAGES, 1980–1982

That US officials would come to frame the full accounting campaign and migration programs for South Vietnamese as humanitarian family-reunification efforts was not inevitable. In the early 1980s, nonstate actors solidified and personified these connections, which US policy makers ultimately echoed and infused with real power. Two important shifts in what human rights scholar Kenneth Cmiel calls the "politics of information" regarding POW/MIAs took place before Reagan officially took office.[84] In 1977, Carter prioritized resuming formal diplomatic relations without preconditions, and therefore was initially willing to accept reasonable rather than demand full accounting. Once the domestic and international contexts shifted, however, a small group within the administration formed the Inter-Agency Group on POW/MIA Affairs (IAG) in March 1980. The IAG, which included policy makers from the NSC, Department of Defense, Department of State, and Joint Chiefs of Staff, became "the focal point of US policy formulation on the POW/MIA issue" in the 1980s.

Among the IAG's earliest members was Ann Mills Griffiths, the sister of a missing American soldier and the civilian head of the National League of Families. Griffiths, Michael Allen observes, "seldom discussed her missing brother in sentimental terms and never alluded to her family life, knowing that as a divorced mother of three she did not fit the mold of the waiting POW wife that Stockdale popularized a decade earlier."[85] While Griffiths

did not explicitly mobilize her status as a woman and mother to underwrite her advocacy, it is likely that American officials and society nevertheless imbued her with a special sort of moral status deriving from these identities, as they did with Ginetta Sagan. Griffith's membership on the IAG, moreover, provided her with access to US policy makers and to classified information.[86] Because the IAG gave Griffiths a literal seat at the table, the League occupied a unique position to directly influence official policy.

The "politics of information" regarding POW/MIAs also changed in more fundamental ways. By December 18, 1978, the total number of American POW/MIAs from the Vietnam War had dwindled to 224.[87] Two years later, however, US officials began to include those previously listed as KIA/BRN – killed in action/body not recovered – to the total number of "unaccounted" for in Southeast Asia. This change meant that, by 1980, the US government regarded all Americans previously listed as POW, MIA, *and* KIA/BNR as belonging to the same category, a change that brought the total number of "POW/MIAs" to 2,500 – a more than 1,000 percent increase.[88] The momentum to fuse these previously distinct categories grew from a realization that wartime distinctions were no longer relevant, as "by 1980 status review boards had concluded that all but a handful of MIAs must be presumed dead."[89] While intended to reinforce the reality that nearly all of the 2,500 Americans whose names remained on the lists were deceased, the classification change had the exact opposite effect, just as the IAG had hoped.

While it was unlikely that officials could provide a "full accounting" for the original 224 POW/MIAs, some of whom were pilots whose planes had exploded over the Pacific, the idea that one could locate the remains of all 2,500 was nothing short of fantasy. In stark contrast, the common vernacular used to refer to these men – "the prisoners" or "the missing" – implied that they could and should be found. Many activists took the logic one step further and argued that surely, of 2,500 men, at least a handful had to be alive. In the politics of information, then, misinformation could be just as important as legitimate data; the widely accepted and oft-repeated perception that 2,500 Americans remained missing from the Vietnam War far outweighed the reality that only 224 Americans warranted such a classification in December 1980.

In the longer view of US military history in the twentieth century, however, even the 2,500 number was historically low. The fact that American soldiers remained unaccounted for at the end of the Vietnam War was not unusual. The combination of cross-oceanic transit, powerful

explosives, and dense terrain left the US government unable to account for the whereabouts of between 2,800 and 3,300 Americans after World War I; 86,500 after World War II; and, 8,000 at the end of the Korean War.[90] In the larger context of twentieth-century American warfare, then, what is most remarkable about the unaccounted for who served in the Vietnam War is that the longest conflict left the fewest number of Americans missing.[91]

Throughout 1982, the importance of POW/MIA accounting continued to grow. In January, Richard Armitage, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, joined the IAG.[92] With Armitage on board, the "group's nucleus" of Griffiths, Armitage, and Richard Childress (NSC Director of Political Affairs) coalesced.[93] In February, Armitage traveled to Hanoi, even as formal ties between the two governments remained suspended, to meet with Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach. At the meeting, Thach "agreed to accelerate their cooperation" and reaffirmed his willingness to meet regularly with his American counterparts in "quarterly technical meetings in Hanoi."[94]

The incongruity between Reagan's belligerent Cold War rhetoric and the reality of US officials in Hanoi collaborating with SRV officials proved dissonant enough to warrant official comment.[95] A "USG Vietnam/Kampuchea Policy: Talking Points" memorandum, for example, explained that "despite the absence of diplomatic relations with the SRV we do discuss with the Vietnamese humanitarian issues such as the Orderly Departure Program and accounting for Americans missing in action in the Vietnam War."[96] Framing the repatriation of POW/MIA remains and migration programs as "humanitarian" endeavors distinguished these concerns from "political" questions.

American officials applied the same logic to Amerasians. A shift in "image politics" precipitated a series of congressional hearings on the status of Amerasians beginning in mid-1981. Photographs of Amerasians began to appear in popular news outlets like the *New York Times*, and images of light-eyed, curly-haired, freckle-faced Amerasians pulled on Americans' heartstrings. Additionally, approximately 15,000 Amerasians were the sons and daughters of African Americans. Many stereotypical phenotypes like skin color, height, and hair texture led Americans to conclude that Black Amerasians were also "obvious" heirs of the US presence in Vietnam.[97]

This compelling "visual evidence" slowly began to supersede legal questions of citizenship in the public and policy makers' minds.[98] In late 1981, a group of Vietnam veterans traveled to Hanoi with a *Times*

reporter and their highly- publicized exposé featured, among other things, the revelation that "swarms of begging half-American children" lived on the streets in Ho Chi Minh City.[99] Despite the Department of Defense's refusal to require former US servicemen take paternity tests, photographs of Amerasians served as compelling visual "proof" of their American parentage. Visual evidence, however, remained problematic as it reinforced long-held stereotypes that assumed Asians were foreigners, not Americans.[100] Nevertheless, nongovernmental advocates used photographs of Amerasians to make an emotionally poignant argument that the United States owed Amerasians a significant and personal responsibility, a stance that built on Ford's assertion of a "profound moral obligation."

The Reagan administration evidently let it be known that it would react to legislation supporting Amerasians' resettlement differently than Carter. As Ted Kennedy put it, although "the voluntary agencies have presented" the issue to Congress throughout the 1970s, "we have not had the kind of support from past administrations . . . to really express true humanitarian concern."[101] Kennedy's expression of appreciation for Reagan's approach reveals some of the unlikely alliances that formed the basis of what would soon become a strong bipartisan consensus in favor of family reunification migration programs.

The House Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law began consideration of the Amerasian Immigration Act (AIA) in the summer of 1982.[102] In an indication of future trends, both Vietnam War veterans and those with no military experience worked together to offer policies regarding US-SRV relations, with veterans playing visible leadership roles. One of the AIA's cosponsors, for example, was Jeremiah "Jerry" Denton (R-AL). Denton, a navy pilot, was shot down and captured by DRV troops in July of 1965 and held as a prisoner of war for eight years. During that time his wife, Jane, became an activist and leader in the League of Wives while caring for the couple's seven children.[103] In 1982, the former POW turned Senator argued that there was something inherently wrong with the fact that Amerasians have "American blood," yet when they apply for admission to the United States, "they are not classified as sons or daughters of US citizens."[104] As Carl Levin (D-MI), another cosponsor, put it, the US was "partly liable" for Amerasians' suffering and "should meet its responsibility by providing the opportunity for a better future."[105] Stewart B. McKinney (R-CT), the bill's final cosponsor, suggested Amerasians were a "very real humanitarian issue" and argued the world "immigration" was inappropriate because "these are American children."[106] Rather than challenge the law dictating that

Amerasians were not US citizens, however, in 1981 policy makers sought to offer Amerasians a path to resettlement that bypassed existing regulations.

Reagan signed the Amerasian Immigration Act on October 22, 1982. During the accompanying ceremony, he suggested the AIA "comes to grips with a problem that I think should touch every American's heart," and, echoing Ford's speech seven years earlier, argued that Americans had "a moral responsibility that we can't ignore" to assist Amerasians.[107] As Allison Varzally notes, "Reagan's support for the act and advocacy of Amerasians reflected a highly selective embrace of refugees in the 1980s consistent with his conservative ideas of family, opposition to Communism, and rebranding of the Vietnam War."[108] The administration also found another cause that served these purposes: reeducation detainees.

While Reagan's geopolitics predisposed his administration to look favorably on calls to assist reeducation camp detainees, nongovernmental advocates also played a vital role in solidifying the links between reeducation camp detainees, human rights, and family reunification. Although AI headquarters in London had published reports on the SRV's reeducation camps since 1977, the organization consistently prohibited its American sections (AIUSA) from adopting Vietnamese prisoners of conscience.[109] Not only did AI ban AIUSA members from adopting Vietnamese POCs; it encouraged its other branches to write to Hanoi "*preferably in FRENCH*."[110] Most Americans seemed to agree with the assumption implicit in AI's directions; after years of devastating warfare, the United States had no moral authority with which to criticize Hanoi.

Ginetta Sagan fundamentally disagreed with this policy. "The American people may be sick of the word Vietnam," she conceded, "but the human rights movement" should be as "devoted to securing the freedom of the present prisoners in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia as they were to securing the release of the prisoners of conscience of the [Nguyen Van] Thieu regime."[111] Although she certainly had her critics, Sagan's personal experiences gave her a unique moral authority and political cover. Just as Nixon's anticommunism made it possible for him to go to Beijing and Moscow, Sagan's status as a former political prisoner – as someone who survived the things most American advocates only read about – meant that while some disapproved of her SRV-focused activism, she still maintained her status as a "Giant" in the human rights community, including occupying a leadership role in AIUSA.[112]

In March 1981, Sagan began her own organization, the Aurora Foundation, to advocate for those outside of Amnesty's mandate. The organization's name invoked Sagan's dramatic memory of what she thought would be her last night alive. Her captors forced her to write her own execution notice and, that evening, while in an Italian jail cell, admiring the starlit sky, she remembered thinking, "I shall never see another aurora [dawn]."[113] While the Aurora Foundation's bylaws describe the Foundation's goals as "improvement throughout the world in the observance of human rights" and "in particular, to educate the public ... about the existence of unlawful repression and torture, wherever occurring, in violation of those rights," the organization focused almost exclusively on the SRV for its first few years.[114] Sagan had multiple reasons to focus so much time and energy on the SRV. Most notably, the attention addressed what she argued was an inexcusable silence in the American human rights movement. Sagan also had more personal connections to the issue. Although the copious records she left only offer traces of insight, it is clear that Sagan lost at least one ally, who was also perhaps a friend, an individual she described as a "former co-worker of H[uman]. Rights" to "the jails of Hanoi."[115]

From its founding, the Aurora Foundation aimed to provide a comprehensive study of the SRV's reeducation camps. Sagan's personal experiences and her work with Amnesty International solidified her belief in the value of firsthand accounts over official explanations. She remained convinced, therefore, that a major study based on refugee testimony would provide a much more reliable and realistic picture than descriptions of reeducation camps offered by Hanoi-approved visitors. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, she interviewed hundreds of former reeducation camp detainees in the United States and in France. By March 1982, she noted "the Vietnam Project has turned out to be larger and more involved than originally anticipated" but resolved to "have the report ready" as soon as possible.[116]

In the meantime, the Foundation issued a brief press release on April 30, 1982, detailing its preliminary findings. "Tens of thousands of political prisoners, whose numbers include members of the pre-1975 South Vietnamese government and armed forces as well as civilians from all professions and religious persuasions," the release explained, "are detained under inhumane conditions in a vast network" of camps.[117] "These prisoners," the report lamented, "have never been charged with a crime nor tried in a court of law, have no legal safeguards to protect them from physical and psychological abuse by their guards."

The report then went on to list four such cases of abuse: "(1) beating of prisoners to death for infractions of camp rules or for 'attempted escape'; (2) shackling of prisoners in underground 'tiger cages'; (3) confinement in 'CONNEX' boxes (small metal freight containers which become suffocating hot when exposed to the sun); and (4) being kept on a starvation diet."[118] By 1982, Amnesty International's headquarters in London and, thanks to Sagan's leadership, Humanitas and the Aurora Foundation all condemned Hanoi's reeducation camp policy, which these NGOs viewed as violating the detainees' human rights.

General knowledge about the camps' existence was widespread enough that US broadcaster Mike Wallace raised the issue in an interview with SRV Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach. In a May edition of "60 Minutes," Wallace painted a bleak picture of human rights conditions in the SRV, noting, "foreign residents here in Hanoi describe Vietnam as one of the most thoroughly authoritarian of police states. Its citizens are under constant surveillance, tens of thousands of them, in what are called labor re-education camps, gulags."[119] Citing Amnesty International's report on the camps, Wallace asked Thach why "tens of thousands of Vietnamese continue to be detained in your labor re-education camps, without charge, many of them, without trial, many of them, and for years and years." Their subsequent exchange is worth quoting:

THACH: You see in my country, after the liberation we have what . . . to deal with millions of people who have cooperated with the American army. So we have a clemency policy towards them. We do not kill them as Kissinger had, had foreseen.

WALLACE: There was no blood bath?

THACH: No blood bath, but I can give all of them to America if America would like to have them. All of them!

WALLACE: You'll free everybody from your labor re-education camps and send them to the United States?

THACH: To the United States.

WALLACE: That's a promise?

THACH: Yes, you can, you can, today you can sign an agreement with me and you could bring them back to the United States.[120]

When Thach repeated his offer later in the summer, the US gave a brief, official response at the ASEAN Minister's meeting in Singapore. American policy makers "welcome[d]" Thach's remarks and conceded that many detainees were "in reeducation camps. . .because of their special ties to the United States." These "special ties" underwrote migration programs that

created loopholes and exceptions to American law to eventually provide for the detainees' resettlement in the United States.

Just as the US response reaffirmed the ongoing ties between Americans and South Vietnamese, the American reaction to Thach's argument also conveyed the hostility with which US policy continued to treat Hanoi. "We are working with the UNHCR to determine if the Vietnamese are in fact prepared to release persons from reeducation camps for resettlement abroad," US officials noted, adding: "If the Vietnamese are serious about the offer to release political prisoners they can begin facilitating interviews by UNHCR representatives in Vietnam with the inmates of the so-called re-education camps. To our knowledge, such interviews have never been permitted."[121]

Rather than "sign an agreement" with Hanoi as Thach suggested in the interview, then, the US responded that the ODP was the best way to facilitate the migration of former reeducation camp detainees.[122] The ODP began in 1979 as a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) multilateral initiative to offer would-be "boat people" a safe, legal alternative to clandestine flight.[123] Using the preexisting ODP would not only obviate the need for a bilateral agreement with Hanoi but also give the US the ability to screen incoming migrants. Thach's all-or-nothing offer likely raised red flags in light of the recent "Mariel Boat Crisis," which taught US officials to insist on screening individuals rather than issue blanket admission to a large group.[124]

Because both American and UN law defined a refugee as one "outside" their country of nationality, however, the ODP created an uncomfortable paradox.[125] While the program aimed to circumvent the myriad of dangers oceanic migrants faced, it involved the migration of those still within their home country. UNHCR officials obviated these legal concerns mostly by ignoring them and emphasizing the program's "humanitarian" and "family reunification" purposes. For American officials, the Refugee Act permitted the president to make exceptions to the law's definition of refugees for cases deemed of "special humanitarian concern."

While widely recognized as codifying a human rights-based defection of refugees, this clause of the Refugee Act also legally coupled the language of humanitarianism and human rights. Conditions like those in the SRV, especially Hanoi's incarceration of former RVN leaders in reeducation camps, were precisely the circumstances that legislators envisioned when they created the "special humanitarian concern" loophole. Testimony from AI representatives about individuals imprisoned in their country of origin formed the backdrop for congressional deliberations,

and when debating the "special humanitarian concern" provision, Congress "emphasized humanitarian considerations, placing the plight of refugees and the pattern of human rights violations in the country of origin as the first factors to be weighed."[126] Accordingly, the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations used the "special humanitarian concern" provision to admit large numbers of Vietnamese, including Amerasians and former reeducation camp detainees, traveling directly from Vietnam to the United States as refugees.[127]

Beginning in October 1981, an average of 330 Vietnamese arrived in the United States through the ODP each month.[128] This early group of ODP arrivals included Khuc Minh Tho's youngest daughter, Nguyen Thi Minh Phuong, who, by 1981, was twenty years old. The last time the mother and daughter had lived in the same country, Phuong was eleven.[129] This near-decade-long separation personifies the trauma and loss that the South Vietnamese people endured on a much larger scale in the years after the RVN's collapse.

Although Washington and Hanoi failed to create a separate program for former detainees in 1982 and for many years thereafter, Thach's offer sparked hope among the United States' growing Vietnamese communities. Many began to organize and lobby their representatives to accept Thach's offer, including Tho.[130] Just as Sagan founded the West Coast chapter of AIUSA at her kitchen table and the League of Wives began as casual gatherings, "get-togethers . . . around kitchen tables," Tho began working on behalf of reeducation detainees by organizing in her living room in Falls Church, Virginia. Like the POW wives, Tho and her associates were initially very reluctant to speak publicly for fear that Hanoi would retaliate against their loved ones.[131] Unlike the overwhelmingly white, upper-middle-class wives of American pilots who began meeting in the 1960s, however, the reeducation camp detainees' wives, sisters, and sweethearts did not possess any of the clout that Sybil Stockdale and POW wives commanded. As Tho recalled, they had "no power, no money, nothing."[132]

Despite these disadvantages, however, Tho had many assets. Her experience working for the RVN government and many connections to the South Vietnamese military gave her political clout among her fellow South Vietnamese and first-hand knowledge of the bureaucratic workings of government. The experience also exposed her to US officials. While working in Manila, for instance, she met Shepard (Shep) Lowman, a US diplomat who was married to a Vietnamese woman. Lowman was the man whose call to Leo Cherne prompted the creation of the Citizens

Commission on Indochinese Refugees. Hiep Lowman also happened to be a former coworker of Tho's, someone she described as a "close friend," and Tho used her connection with the Lowmans to ask Shep to do what he could on behalf of reeducation camp detainees. While Tho's actions in the late 1970s and early 1980s were not yet as influential or coordinated as Sagan's organizing efforts, the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association, under Tho's leadership, soon became one of the most influential Vietnamese American NGOs in the country.

SOLIDIFYING AN EXPANDED AMERICAN APPROACH, 1983–1984

During Reagan's first two years in the White House, nongovernmental organizations helped lay the groundwork for the administration to adopt more assertive stances regarding POW/MIAs, Amerasians, and reeducation detainees. Without official backing, however, none of the causes would have become embedded in US policy. In 1983 and 1984, the administration adopted and elevated growing efforts to seek the full accounting of missing Americans and provide for the migration of Amerasians and reeducation camp prisoners to the United States.

In January of 1983, Reagan gave the keynote address at a meeting of the National League of POW/MIA Families. The president's decision to deliver his remarks in person, after turning down the same invitation three years earlier, symbolized the larger shift in governmental priorities. If the League's members had high hopes as they sat in anticipation for the president's address, Reagan did not disappoint. "The government bureaucracy now understands," he explained, that "the return of all POWs, the fullest possible accounting for the still missing, and the repatriation of the remains of those who died serving our nation . . . are the highest national priority."[133]

The speech marked a point of departure in several key respects. While, especially thanks to Griffith's seat on the IAG, the League already enjoyed a privileged place in policy-making circles, after Reagan's highly publicized commitment to the issue, the POW/MIA campaign "enjoyed more money, media coverage, and political influence" than it had before or since.[134] Additionally, Reagan's inclusion of "return of live POWs" in his official remarks signaled the first time a post-1975 US president publicly endorsed the myth that the SRV continued to hold live prisoners.[135] While the League perpetuated this belief for years, Reagan legitimized the claim and heightened expectations for the return of live Americans.[136] Although

satisfying for POW/MIA families in the short term, Reagan's soaring rhetoric and implicit promises raised hopes without any evidence to support those inflated expectations. In the long run, the gap between the president's promises and what the US government could actually deliver sowed bitterness and led, inevitably, to disappointment.

Reagan's bold and unequivocal rhetoric served the president's immediate political purposes, however, by shifting the burden of responsibility for POW/MIA accounting to Hanoi. As the League put it after Reagan's remarks, "The problem now is in Hanoi, not in Washington."[137] That is, after the League obtained the commitment it had long desired from the US government, the next step in facilitating a full accounting was to garner SRV cooperation. One close League ally who was no doubt heartened to see the transformation in US policy was Senator Bob Dole (R-KA). Dole, a decorated World War II veteran, drew on his own wartime experiences by making "veterans and the disabled" high priorities during his long tenure in Congress. This predisposition, combined with his close relationship with his "strong, independent mother," made him a natural ally for Stockdale and other POW and MIA wives during the early 1970s.[138] As a legislator who had consistently proven himself to be an advocate for POW/MIA families, it was with some satisfaction that, after Reagan's address, Dole observed in a speech before the Vietnam Veterans of America that the biggest obstacle to POW/MIA accounting was no longer the US government. Rather, "the attitude of the Vietnamese Government is the single most important factor in resolving the fate of our POW/MIAs," he argued.[139] American policy makers could make all the promises they wanted, but unless the SRV permitted US officials to search for missing American servicemen in Vietnam, there would be no accounting whatsoever.

After Reagan's 1983 speech, POW/MIA accounting solidified its position as the single most visible and politically sensitive issue in US-Vietnamese relations. POW/MIAs featured most prominently in American rhetoric and had a broad base of public support in the United States that the Amerasian and reeducation camp issues never enjoyed. Even if POW/MIA accounting achieved unmatched support and popularity in US domestic politics, the administration put full accounting and migration programs on equal footing insofar as it framed each as a "humanitarian" issue that the former adversaries had to resolve before they could address "political" questions.

Three months after Reagan's defining POW/MIA speech, on the eighth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, Sagan released her *Violations of Human*

Rights in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, April 30, 1975–April 30, 1983. While the fifty-five-page report had short sections on the "Repression of Ethnic Chinese" and "Religious Persecution," Sagan and her coauthor Stephen Denney devoted the overwhelming majority of the report to "Reeducation – North and South." The three appendixes that accompanied the main text were also entirely devoted to documenting reeducation camps and detainees. Sagan's long tenure with Amnesty International was evident not only in the report's methodology and structure, but also in its policy recommendations, or lack thereof. Like AI, the Aurora Foundation did not endorse any specific policies. The closest thing was Sagan's call for a "major effort to mobilize public opinion and break the silence surrounding conditions in the reeducation camps" in the text's acknowledgments.[140]

Sagan's report still received significant attention in policy-making circles, however. Elliot Abrams, the Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, wrote Sagan in May and described her report as "a striking addition to the understanding of events there."[141] He wrote again less than a month later. "I want to write again to tell you how important I think this report is," he explained. "It has been getting wide distribution, and is really a landmark: no one will ever again be able to claim that he did not know."[142] Congressmen, State Department officials, and others also wrote Sagan to thank her for the report,[143] and Sagan personally sent additional copies to the UN Secretary General and to the White House.[144] Senator Ted Kennedy's response to Sagan's report is typical of the letters she received: "Your study will be of great assistance in calling attention to this problem," he wrote. "Thank you for sending it to me. I will be certain to put it to good use."[145] That Abrams and Kennedy were both grateful for Sagan's report and eager to enact policies that addressed the issue demonstrates the different motivates underwriting US migration programs for South Vietnamese. While some were eager to continue fighting the Vietnam War in memory, others sought to charter a course forward and attempt to make amends for the profound failures of US policies. That both groups could find common cause in concern for reeducation camp detainees helps explain why the related migration programs enjoyed bipartisan support.

That *Violation of Human Rights in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam* appeared on April 30, 1983, was no coincidence. The Aurora Foundation, like Amnesty International and others before it, used the anniversary of communist military victory – a moment that naturally renewed the world's interest in Vietnam – to help gain the greatest possible publicity

for its reports. What Sagan could not have anticipated, however, is that the month before her report's long-established release date, Reagan called the Soviet Union an "evil empire" in a speech before the National Association of Evangelicals.[146] Also in March 1983, Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), more commonly known as "Star Wars," which soured US-Soviet relations considerably.[147]

At precisely the same moment that the administration took its reinvigoration of the Cold War to new levels, Sagan's report added evidence to the president's claims about the evils of communism. The report provided the best-yet available evidence from an American source that Hanoi, a Soviet ally, was systematically violating its citizens' human rights. The NSC's response to Sagan's publication, for example, noted, "although the State Department's annual human rights report on Vietnam underscores our official abhorrence of the situation in Vietnam, private efforts such as yours are critical in focusing national and international attention on the issue."[148]

While Sagan's publication helped infuse urgency into the reeducation camp issue, the failure of the Amerasian Immigration Act created similar momentum for a new policy to address Vietnamese Amerasians. Although the AIA constituted a "legal breakthrough" as it "represented the United States' first public recognition of its moral responsibility to those children who had been fathered by Americans abroad," the law's legacy, especially in regard to Vietnamese Amerasians, is one of fatal shortcomings.[149] Most importantly, the AIA provided for the admission of only Amerasians and made no provisions for their mothers or siblings to accompany them.[150] This requirement, which codified Americans' tendency to erase Asian mothers and depict all Amerasians as orphans, made a mockery of the law's stated humanitarian purpose by, in many cases, requiring family separation rather than facilitating family reunification.[151] This contradiction proved so profound that many of the voluntary agencies which lobbied for Amerasian legislation, some for decades, "threatened to withdraw their services if Amerasians were deliberately removed from their Vietnamese families."[152]

Especially for Vietnamese Amerasians, the AIA remained flawed in two additional respects. First, the lack of diplomatic relations between Washington and Hanoi made the copious paperwork necessary for the AIA "almost impossible" to complete.[153] Second, the AIA defined Amerasians as immigrants instead of refugees, which meant those who emigrated through the program were not eligible for any of the much more comprehensive benefits or services that the US government offered to

refugees.[154] Thus, by 1985, only four Vietnamese Amerasians came to the United States through the AIA.[155] While a few traveled through the ODP, the logjam did not satisfy Amerasian advocates or SRV leaders, who viewed Amerasians as an undesirable population and American responsibility.

Because the United States continued to blame the SRV – particularly Hanoi's refusal to withdraw its troops from Cambodia – for the lack of diplomatic relations between the two states, the AIA provided another means through which Reagan could criticize the SRV's unwillingness to cooperate on humanitarian issues. The extreme failure of the AIA to bring any tangible results for Vietnamese Amerasians, however, forced the administration to come up with an alternative. For both Amerasians and reeducation camp prisoners, US policy makers turned to the Orderly Departure Program.

In October 1983, Congressmen Stephen Solarz, a longtime advocate for expansive refugee admissions, gave a speech before the United Nations General Assembly that foreshadowed future administration policy. Solarz, a Democrat, applauded the Reagan administration's ongoing admission of oceanic and overland refugees and also commended the UNHCR's role in facilitating the Orderly Departure Program. Without specifically mentioning the abysmal failure of the Amerasian Immigration Act, the congressman noted that the ODP "made it possible for Asian-American children and their immediate families to leave Vietnam and come to the US" and explained that the United States looks "forward to expansion of this program."[156] He also expressed his "hope" that the UNHCR could arrange for the ODP to facilitate the resettlement of former reeducation camp detainees. In explaining US support for the "matter of the greatest humanitarian urgency," Solarz emphasized that an ODP subprogram for reeducation camp prisoners would provide former detainees with "their freedom" and "a chance to rejoin their families."[157]

US and SRV officials also had a private meeting in Geneva to discuss these concerns. During the discussions, US officials provided their Vietnamese counterparts with "a list of almost 2,000 special humanitarian cases, including names of political prisoners and their families and requested their immediate release."[158] "We have made absolutely clear to Vietnam," Paul D. Wolfowitz, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, explained, "both directly and through the UNHCR, that the United States is prepared to receive past and present 're-education camp' political prisoners, as well as more Asian-Americans

and a continuing large number of family reunification cases" through the ODP.[159]

In early 1984, the United States also made the value and priority it assigned to POW/MIA accounting "absolutely clear" as well. In February the IAG "nucleus" of Armitage, Childress, and Griffiths traveled to Hanoi with State Department officials to have face-to-face discussions with Vietnamese leaders. The meeting marked "the highest level delegation to visit Vietnam since the end of the war," which, as Childress explained to his hosts, arrived "in good will to achieve a breakthrough."[160] Childress also hand delivered a letter to Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach from Secretary of State George P. Shultz, which praised Hanoi's "private assurances that this is a humanitarian issue to be resolved apart from political differences."[161] The letter also explained that "resolution of this issue will improve the atmosphere between our two countries, and could provide a basis of trust for future reference by both our governments."[162]

The tone of Childress's official remarks in Hanoi, however, bordered on threatening. "The world is watching us," he reminded SRV leaders. After commenting on Hanoi's shrewd use of American public opinion during the Vietnam War, Childress warned that "American public opinion is clearly demanding answers and it is sometimes ugly towards Vietnam." "They view with great hostility," he further explained, "any attempt to use it [the POW/MIA issue] for political purposes or avoidance of government-to-government cooperation" because the issue, "in their eyes," is "one of basic humanity." Switching from stick to carrot, Childress argued, "should we achieve a government-government breakthrough, a dramatic shift in opinion concerning Vietnam could occur. . . . It is in both your short-and long-term national interest to seize this historic opportunity." One can only imagine the SRV officials' reaction as an American lectured them about Vietnamese national interest less than a decade after the last US helicopter left Saigon. The combative US approach to POW/MIA accounting, especially during the 1980s, demonstrates the ways American hubris and hostility persisted into US-Vietnamese relations after 1975. Officials in Hanoi clearly understood the stakes Washington attached to POW/MIA accounting and soon thereafter attempted to minimize and "solve" the issue before it became as unruly as Childress warned.

The nature and context of this February 1984 meeting set a variety of important precedents. Moving forward, the United States demanded that Hanoi divide "humanitarian" issues – concerns imbued with human rights rhetoric that strategically prioritized Americans and South

Vietnamese with familial ties to the United States – from "political" considerations. At the same time, American policy makers made it clear that failure to resolve the humanitarian concerns would have severe political consequences. As Barbara Keys and others have argued, although "the human rights idea" purported to be universal and "offered a sense of purity and transcendence of politics," human rights rhetoric "was at heart a political language."[163] US policy makers turned POW/MIA accounting into an especially politicized dialect of humanitarian rhetoric. In the years that followed, the US made increasingly audacious demands on SRV leaders.

At the same time, US officials faced consistent charges at home that they were not doing enough. Accusations that American officials were partaking in a government conspiracy to conceal the existence of live Americans in Indochina had already begun and only grew throughout the 1980s.[164] While US policy makers certainly fanned the flames of the domestic POW/MIA lobby and used that lobby's existence as a pretense to make extraordinary demands in meetings with their SRV counterparts, American officials also never controlled POW/MIA advocates.

If the pace of POW/MIA accounting remained unsatisfactory to many Americans, the status of US-Vietnamese negotiations regarding reeducation camp detainees also gave little reason for optimism. In May of 1984, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong repeated Thach's offer to release reeducation detainees. During an interview with *Newsweek*, he explained that the Vietnamese "are quite prepared to allow all of those left in the camps to leave tomorrow for the US, but the US government has rejected that suggestion."[165] The reality was more complicated than this summary. Although the United States had yet to publicly accept the SRV offer, Washington also had not declined the invitation. Rather, US officials were working behind the scenes to help lay the foundations for a migration program.[166] The question, increasingly, was not *if* the US would provide for the migration of reeducation camp detainees but *how*.

Nevertheless, after the SRV's renewed offer in May 1984, nonstate actors like Ginetta Sagan and the United States Committee for Refugees (USCR) called for the administration to take action.[167] Nongovernmental advocates also found allies in Congress. In a letter dated August 10, for instance, ten legislators explained to Reagan that many reeducation camp detainees "worked for the United States' programs in Vietnam" and were individuals "left behind in the evacuation . . . or who stayed behind to save their families."[168] "In some sense," the congressmen continued, "for the Vietnamese who have spent the last nine years in communist prisons, the

war has never ended."[169] This statement was true for both the detainees themselves and for their families, as Khuc Minh Tho's story so vividly demonstrates.

In September 1984, Secretary of State George P. Shultz formally announced two initiatives on behalf of reeducation camp detainees and Amerasians. He described both groups as "pressing refugee problems in Southeast Asia."[170] Using the "refugee" label in this instance conformed to popular tendencies to apply the term without precision (reeducation camp prisoners and Amerasians remained in their country of nationality and therefore did not meet the legal definition of "refugee"). More importantly, suggesting that these groups warranted refugee status implied that government in Hanoi was violating its citizens' human rights to such an extent that it qualified reeducation camp detainees and Amerasians as having a "well-founded fear of being persecuted."

"The United States will accept for admission all Asian-American children and their qualifying family members presently in Vietnam – hopefully over the next three years," Shultz explained. "Because of their undisputed ties to our country," he continued, "these children and family members are of particular humanitarian concern to the United States." Shultz used similarly careful wording to describe the administration's plans for a reeducation detainee resettlement program. He proclaimed Washington's intention to create a "separate and distinct program" within the ODP for former detainees and their families. The Secretary of State also characterized detainees and "their qualifying family members" as "of particular humanitarian concern" to the United States and explained that within the 50,000 East Asian refugee camp, the president earmarked 10,000 slots for them.[171]

Shultz's language adhered to the Refugee Act of 1980's loophole clause and, by earmarking Amerasians and reeducation camp detainees as of "particular humanitarian concern," made them eligible for refugee status under US law. While Shultz had emotional and legal incentives to frame Amerasians and reeducation camp prisoners as populations of "special humanitarian concern," this approach also echoed the language used by nongovernmental actors like Sagan. This framing gave the administration political cover, as it explained the seeming incongruity between the administration's reinvigoration of the Cold War during its first term and its expansion of ongoing dialogue with Hanoi. While cooperation with a Soviet ally could normally open the door for criticism, labeling Amerasians and reeducation camp prisoners as refugees permitted Reagan to celebrate US generosity *and* support other combative policy

measures like the economic embargo. Like US rhetoric on POW/MIA accounting, then, framing migration programs as family-reunification based humanitarian initiatives permitted the administration to score propaganda points in the short term. In the long run, however, negotiating and implementing bilateral and multilateral policies undercut the administration's combative motivations and, ultimately, contributed to the normalization of US-Vietnamese relations.

CONCLUSION

In the late 1970s, American policy makers clashed about how to approach the government in Hanoi and whether the United States had ongoing commitments to the South Vietnamese people. By 1980, US policy coalesced and, for all of Reagan's criticisms of his predecessor, his administration perpetuated three important pillars of Carter's policy. In the 1980s, the United States sustained an international effort to economically isolate Vietnam, maintained that US-Vietnamese normalization was impossible while Vietnamese troops occupied Cambodia, and continued to admit large numbers of those who fled Indochina by land and sea. In addition to continuing these previous approaches, the Reagan administration also expanded the US-SRV dialogue by awarding POW/MIA accounting and the migration of reeducation camp detainees and Amerasians a prominent place on the US agenda vis-à-vis the SRV.

That the migration of Amerasians and reeducation camp prisoners and the full accounting of POW/MIAs came to occupy a place of prominence on the American policy agenda in 1983–1984 was not a coincidence. Each of these long-standing causes experienced a shift in the politics of information and images that created new momentum for their adoption. The increase in the number of American servicemen listed as POW/MIA suggested that the problem was much larger than previously suspected, and Ann Mills Griffiths's presence on the Interagency POW/MIA Task Force helped ensure that the issue would receive a more favorable hearing from US policy makers. Additionally, the appearance of photographs of light-eyed, freckle-faced and tall, dark-skinned Amerasians confronted Americans with powerful visual "evidence" that the United States owed Vietnamese Amerasians a special obligation. Finally, Ginetta Sagan's 1983 report, a substantive publication based on first-hand accounts, provided what many policy makers characterized as definitive evidence that Hanoi's reeducation policy constituted a gross violation of the detainees' human rights. While these data and images were undoubtedly

powerful, it is highly unlikely that they, on their own, would have brought about any meaningful changes.

Official backing remained crucial, and the White House was eager to receive precisely the type of information that NGOs were providing in the early 1980s. Given the widespread criticism of US conduct during the Vietnam War, Reagan's rebranding of the conflict as a "noble cause" should have been a tough sell. Charges that Hanoi continued to detain American prisoners of war and used their remains as diplomatic bargaining chips, oppressed innocent children for no other reason than their mixed parentage, and incarcerated former South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians in camps that violated their human rights, however, all supported Reagan's charges of American beneficence and Vietnamese perfidy. These concerns also bolstered the president's claims about the evils of communism and his efforts to reinvigorate the Cold War more broadly. The NGOs that lobbied on behalf of these groups did not see their missions as confirming or denying any specific geopolitical vision, however. Rather, each group sought a combination of human rights, family reunification, and closure. The NGOs that tirelessly advocated for POW/MIAs, Amerasians, and reeducation camp detainees and the Reagan administration, then, adopted the same causes for decidedly different reasons.

Besides serving the administration's larger agenda, each of these concerns had another common feature: they required Vietnamese compliance and therefore US-Vietnamese cooperation. Efforts to turn US promises into reality initiated a sharp increase in US-Vietnamese contact and collaboration in the second half of the 1980s, a change which reflected a larger reorientation in the administration's relations with communist countries. Because the implementation of policies to address humanitarian causes created personal, institutional, and governmental links, these programs facilitated normalization between Washington and Hanoi.