“Give us a Ship”: The Vietnamese Repatriate Movement on Guam, 1975

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In September 1975 a group of determined Vietnamese men participated in an elaborate and highly choreographed political demonstration in a U.S. refugee camp on Guam. Four men volunteered to have their heads shaved in a public performance of dissent. A makeshift platform served as a stage, and dozens of Vietnamese men witnessed the ritual head-shaving. A U.S. military public affairs officer documented the protest. He observed the event from a distance, and the final image was framed by barbed wire and attested to the Vietnamese protesters’ confinement. In the background, a banner proclaimed boldly in English, “Thirty-Six Hours, Hunger Sit-In, Quiet, Hair Shaving Off, To Pray for a Soon Repatriation.” The men were organized and purposeful in their actions, and through striking visuals they directed their message to the American, Guamanian, Vietnamese, and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) officials who controlled their future. For in contrast to the more than 100,000 Vietnamese who sought and soon gained resettlement in the United States, more than 1,500 men and women who left Vietnam in the final weeks of war insisted in no uncertain terms on being repatriated. They did not want to resettle in the United States. They wanted to return to Vietnam.

The story of Vietnamese repatriates provides an unsettling counternarrative to the dominant story of Vietnamese immigration to the United States. As Yen Le Espiritu has argued, the U.S. government and the mainstream media consciously positioned Vietnamese refugees as a population to be “saved” by America and Americans, and through their rescue, the United States could redeem and erase its imperial war in Vietnam. The repatriates’ consistent demands to return to Vietnam rejected this U.S.- scripted fantasy. Furthermore, unlike most accounts of Vietnamese American history, which have emphasized questions of acculturation, assimilation, identity, and community formation, the repatriates turn our attention to contingency at the moment in between Vietnam and the United States both temporally and spatially.
The politics of contingency possesses a special resonance in this chaotic moment at the end of a war. Contingency encompasses a double-necessity that became acute for Vietnamese repatriates. On the one hand, contingency refutes a preordained future and emphasizes the possibility of both agency and chance, while on the other hand, contingency implies dependence and interrelationship—one event or action is of course contingent on the next. The history of the Vietnamese repatriates startles and surprises because it so thoroughly upends accepted narratives of Cold War migration and Vietnamese Americans’ resettlement in the United States. The men and women who wanted to return to Vietnam recognized the moment’s fluidity and the need to take an aggressive stand if they did not wish to be couriered to the United States with the vast majority of their conationalists. Their strident tactics inside (and at times, outside) the refugee camps contradicted the Cold War norms that had governed U.S.-Vietnam relations consistently, yet consistently imperfectly, since at least the 1950s. Their actions simply did not fit a politics of communism or anticommunism. Instead, repatriates’ multidirectional routes back and forth between Vietnam, Guam, and the United States demonstrated

Figure 1.
A U.S. military photographer recorded the repatriates’ hunger strike in September 1975. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.
their ability to defy all expectations even in the midst of a mass evacuation directed by the U.S. military.

On yet another level, Vietnamese repatriates’ stories reveal the interdependent relationships between local, national, and international institutions, including Guam, the U.S. government, the UNHCR, and two Vietnamese governments (the southern Provisional Revolutionary Government and the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam). Repatriates’ militant actions, protests, and pleas found an audience with these diverse political entities, yet ultimately their futures depended on the decisions of the U.S. government and the revolutionary Vietnamese government. Finally, contingency also marks the history of American empire, for the U.S. acquisition of territories was neither monolithic nor all-encompassing but specific and time bound. As Amy Kaplan has urged, it is necessary to “bring a sense of contingency to this idea of empire, to show that imperialism is an interconnected network of power relations.” Thus it seems telling that repatriates’ most vocal and active protests took place on Guam, an island defined by its colonial legacy with the United States. In this vein, their stories bring together contingent narratives of migration and contingent narratives of empire, all coming to a head on Guam in 1975.

Located almost four thousand miles from Hawaii (and almost six thousand miles from California), Guam illuminates the tensions and tenacity of American empire. In 1975 Guam became the primary staging ground for refugees, thus juxtaposing the United States’ nineteenth-century imperial project with its failed Cold War objectives in Southeast Asia. Over the past generation, scholars have argued for the critical importance of making American empire visible and excavating sites, which have been “forgotten,” even as the U.S. imperial project evolves in the contemporary moment. Such scholars as Kaplan, Kristin Hoganson, Paul Kramer, Julian Go, Eileen Findley, and Christina Duffy Burnett have revisited the War of 1898 and the U.S. occupations of Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico, yet Guam has remained little more than a footnote. In many ways, Guam epitomizes Ann Laura Stoler’s conception of a place “haunted by empire,” which she defines as a colonial legacy, which is alternately invisible, familiar, and at times threatening. In particular, Stoler’s work compels historians of the United States to take the intimacies of empire seriously, challenging scholars to analyze child rearing, education, and sexual encounters as key sites of colonial control and power. As she recognizes, her work alludes to, but does not delve into, the “pungent, violent intimacies of prisons, barracks, and detention centers,” which she notes are “pressing for further attention.” Repatriates’ stories reveal just such a moment of micropolitics
in a refugee camp on the edge of American empire. Repatriates’ predicament draws attention to the network of U.S. camps in Guam, which have been all but ignored by popular and academic accounts. To date, the invisibility of the repatriates’ experiences has mapped onto the forgetting of Guam, yet through reconstructing their stories, both the United States’ colonial legacy on Guam and the fraught closure of the U.S. war in Vietnam come into relief.

Repatriates’ stories also raise potent questions for scholars of migration and refugees. Increasingly, scholars of U.S. immigration have analyzed how empire has created pathways for workers, refugees, spouses, and even adopted children. In contrast, Vietnamese repatriates sought to change the momentum and the flow of people away from the United States. The textual and visual archives, including previously untapped U.S. military records and photographs, Guam’s *Pacific Daily News*, and a singular Vietnamese memoir, elicit multiple Vietnamese perspectives, conflicts between Guamanian and U.S. officials, and a sense of urgency and desperation on all sides. Perhaps the cases that best parallel the Vietnamese repatriates’ experiences are the stories of Cold War defectors, returnees, and prisoners of war, which Susan Carruthers has so artfully analyzed in *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing*. In these cases of individual escape and capture in the 1940s and 1950s, Carruthers argues that “the cold war imaginary was . . . profoundly informed by the dichotomy between mobility and captivity.” The paradigm of captivity resonates in the repatriates’ stories; however, rather than individual escape, collective action was essential to their campaign, and the repatriates were all but ignored by the American mass media in 1975. Their stories contribute to this growing scholarship on Cold War migration while emphasizing the contingency and multidirectional nature of migration in this moment of uncertainty.

Finally, if the history of the Vietnamese repatriates refuted an American rescue narrative of Vietnamese refugees, it also cannot be read as a triumphant rejection of U.S. imperialism or a romanticized revolutionary victory. In fact, repatriates’ tenacity and successful protests resulted in one of the war’s lesser-known tragedies. In October 1975, 1,546 repatriates boarded the *Thuong Tin I*, a Vietnamese ship, and ventured back to Vietnam without the approval of the southern Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) or the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). As the repatriate ship captain, Tran Dinh Tru, articulated on leaving Guam, “I felt utter sorrow flooding over me, and tears welled up in my eyes, unsure if I was coming back to my family and my homeland or journeying into the netherworld.” On arrival in Vietnam, to the best of my knowledge, the PRG placed the repatriates in reeducation
The Vietnamese Repatriate Movement on Guam, 1975

Thus the repatriates traveled from a U.S. detention camp on Guam to the network of euphemistically named “reeducation camps” in Vietnam, which were better characterized by hard labor, starvation, and torture than any “education.”

This article argues that repatriates’ political challenges revealed a far more contingent political space between the United States and Vietnam than either nation-state was able to fathom. First, it briefly explains Guam’s colonial history and situates Guam as the central location for U.S.-run Vietnamese refugee camps in 1975. Second, it explores the multiple explanations men and women articulated for choosing repatriation over resettlement in the United States. Their stories attest to the chaos at the end of the war, confusion, and the stark absence of choice for many of those who had “evacuated.” Third, the story turns to repatriates’ mobilization and their effective use of civil disobedience, rhetoric, and even violence and vandalism to catalyze their campaign. From there, the article analyzes the U.S. government’s eventual acquiescence to the repatriates’ wishes, despite the UNHCR’s reservations, which led to the launching of the Thuong Tin 1 back to Vietnam under repatriates’ own skill and manpower.

Vietnamese repatriates’ struggles resonate in the contemporary moment, as they reveal the tension between mobility and confinement and underscore the architecture of empire. At the same time, their stories do not fall into a neat binary. They neither provide some salvation to the U.S. imperial war in Vietnam nor redeem the revolutionary Vietnamese government. Instead, the history of the Vietnamese repatriates underscores the slipperiness of contingency and the haunting choices facing refugees who found themselves in between hostile states after more than a decade of war.

Refugee Camps on Guam

In April 1975 Vietnamese refugees did not travel by ship or plane directly from Saigon or the Pacific to the mainland United States. Often glossed over in popular and historical accounts, the U.S. government held 111,919 Vietnamese in Guam before authorizing their entrance into the continental United States or Hawai‘i. In a matter of weeks, the refugees more than doubled the Guamanian local population, which numbered just shy of 100,000 residents in 1975. For Guam, the Vietnamese exodus could only be described as massive. Guam governor Ricardo (Ricky) Bordallo openly supported the Vietnamese refugee operation, and despite some local objections, U.S. military planes and
ships began landing on Guam with refugees at the end of April 1975. Commenting on Guam's minimal autonomy, Guam senator Carl Gutierrez noted, "Why are we arguing about this? It's all been settled by the U.S. government and we have to make the best of it." The military constructed a physical environment marked by barbed wire, chain-link fences, and armed guards. The Vietnamese refugees were not allowed to leave the camps, nor were unauthorized Guamanians allowed into the camps.

Although the U.S. war in Vietnam was over, the reality of American empire was more than apparent in Guam's geography and history. Guam's colonial and island space served as a liminal zone between Vietnam and the United States, where repatriates possessed ambiguous legal status and the U.S. military loomed large. A Spanish possession since 1565, Guam became a U.S. territory under the 1898 Treaty of Paris, and much like Puerto Rico, it has not experienced modern political independence. Under absolute U.S. military control from 1898 through 1950 (save for the years of Japanese occupation during World War II), the U.S. Navy owned and controlled Guam for half a century, and its institutions and installations fundamentally transformed and militarized the environment and culture of the indigenous Chamorro communities. With the 1950 Organic Act, the U.S. government transferred power to the Department of the Interior. Even with this civilian handover, the U.S. military continued to control more than 36 percent of Guam's territory. The Organic Act granted Guamanians U.S. citizenship, albeit without presidential voting rights, congressional representation, or full constitutional protections. In fact, Guamanians did not have direct elections for governor until 1970. Because of high rates of military enlistment, Guam also bore the distinction of having the highest per capita casualty rate of any state or territory in the war in Vietnam. Guam's political apparatus balanced between poorly represented indigenous and local communities and extreme dependence on the U.S. government and military.

In 1975 the U.S. military established a constellation of twelve refugee camps on Guam through a combination of military bases and leased corporate facilities. The largest camps were located on U.S. military property. On Andersen Air Force Base, ten buildings that had been scheduled for demolition were quickly cleaned out and refurbished, and Orote Point, a former World War II airfield, became the central staging ground for "Tent City." In addition to several smaller military facilities, private companies such as Black Construction, J&G Construction, the Hawaiian Dredging company, and the Tokyu Hotel became temporary refugee camps. Perhaps most hauntingly, the Seabees converted fourteen buildings at Camp Asan into a camp for Vietnamese refugees.
on the very same ground that had been used to jail Filipino insurrectionists during the U.S.-Philippine War.20

The language describing the proliferation of refugee camps on Guam could be elusive, as both the terms *refugee* and *camp* came with substantial historical baggage. Many official documents referred to the camps in euphemisms, calling them “reception centers,” presumably to avoid the undercurrent of involuntary confinement.21 Senator Edward Kennedy even noted the unfortunate connotations of the military operation’s official name, “Operation New Life,” which had “an uncomfortable ring with the old ‘New Life Hamlets’ or ‘strategic hamlets’ of the Diem years.”22 Barbed wire and military personnel aside, the U.S. government hoped to distinguish its camps from refugee camps at large. As one military spokesman explained, the barbed wire was “not to confine the people, but to keep [other] people out of there.” The word *refugee* was also loaded, and at first, the military made a point of calling the Vietnamese “evacuees.” As one enlisted man cracked, “I know they’re evacuees. . . . I know it because the general said it’s so.”23 Not only did *evacuee* lack the drama and compassion that *refugee* connoted, it also was bereft of international or national rights or obligations; there were no international conventions on evacuees. While newspapers, military personnel, and even official reports soon dropped *evacuee* for *refugee* seemingly out of simple common usage, the fact remained that the Vietnamese were *not* legally refugees according to U.S. law. Instead, the executive branch admitted Vietnamese into the United States as “parolees,” a linguistic invention in the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, which allowed for “temporary admission” for foreigners who fell outside U.S. immigration law.24 Despite these linguistic and legal contortions, most of the state and nonstate documents almost universally referred to the Vietnamese as “refugees” and the military bases as “camps.”

The military’s goal throughout the operation was to seize a public relations “win” and counteract the images of U.S. military failure in Vietnam. As one military official explained, the goal was to “preserve a good army image,” and by most measures, the military succeeded in handling the mission with “professionalism, dedication, and humanitarianism.”25 Thus the military disconnected itself from the war in Vietnam that had created the refugee crisis in the first place, and rhetorically and materially redefined itself as an effective and life-affirming arm of the government. It soon became clear, however, that the U.S. personnel on Guam could barely keep up with the logistics; they faced basic difficulties with computers, providing individuals with ID numbers, and even mastering Vietnamese naming practices. After more than ten years of mili-
tary fighting in Vietnam, the U.S. government was still flummoxed by the Vietnamese practice of surnames coming before given names. The majority of Vietnamese refugees spent less than two weeks on Guam, although some waited on Guam for up to three months. Their stays were met with bureaucracy, medical exams, and then transit to the mainland United States either with a sponsor or to a stateside refugee camp on Fort Chaffee, Camp Pendleton, Fort Indiantown Gap, or Eglin Air Force base. By August 26, 1975, the last flight of refugees departed from Guam to the United States.

Yet complicating this efficient and “feel good” narrative, at its high point, as many as two thousand refugees remained unwavering in their determination to return to Vietnam. Although they were in U.S. territory, Vietnamese repatriates recognized that Guam was not quite the United States. They also soon realized that Guam’s colonial and liminal status might be of some value to them. Underscoring the legacies of empire, neither fully inside nor fully outside the United States, Vietnamese repatriates held their ground on Guam.
Evacuations, Broken Families, and Kidnappings

As early as May 3, 1975, several Vietnamese Air Force personnel came forward and requested repatriation, and within weeks, the number climbed to more than two thousand repatriation inquiries. Who were these men and women who wanted to go back to Vietnam? Had they intended to leave Vietnam? Had they changed their minds midstream? Were they National Liberation Front (NLF) spies or CIA plants? In short, why would anyone do such a thing? Repatriates’ presence on Guam spoke to the chaos and overwhelming speed of events as the North Vietnamese advanced on Saigon. Repatriates expressed a sense of anger and panic about their lack of control and the circuitous routes that led them to Guam. Behind their formal statements, repatriates’ reasons for return were multiple, including family reunification, professed identity with land and nation, and occasionally even political loyalties to the new government. This range of self-presentation underscored the contingent moment, revealing the fears of men and women who were making a final rupture with their past and, of course, did not know the future.

In the singular Vietnamese repatriate memoir I located, Vietnam Thuong Tin Con Tau Dinh Menh, Tran Dinh Tru explained his decision making through the language of family reunification. Tru was born in northern Vietnam to a well-to-do Catholic family that fled to southern Vietnam after 1954. A devout Catholic and staunch anticommunist, Tru was forty years old and a lieutenant colonel in the RVN Navy in 1975. As the North Vietnamese Army advanced on Saigon, Tru prepared for his wife and family to escape, and he arranged for a ship to pick them up in Nam Can south of Saigon. He himself was ordered on a warship to help with the evacuation. Despite his best efforts, the captain he had solicited to rescue his family lied to him and never went ashore to look for his family. Tru arrived in Guam alone and in despair. Even though Tru believed he would have had a relatively easy adjustment in the United States because of his proficient English and experience with the U.S. military, he could not fathom leaving his family under communist rule. Instead, he decided to return: “I was ready to accept everything even imprisonment or death. Then if I didn’t die but was only jailed for a few years, upon my release I could still find a way to take my family out of the country. . . . At all costs, I would take my family out of Vietnam.” His friends and family tried to persuade him to go on to the United States, yet “nothing could sway my determination.” On account of his experience and his high rank, Tru became a leader among the repatriate community. In his searing memoir, his narration of military masculin-
ity was intimately entwined with reuniting and saving his family and wife from communism. Written decades after the fact, he explained his unorthodox decision to return to communist-controlled Vietnam as an anticommunist action.

Like Tran Dinh Tru, approximately 80 percent of the repatriates were South Vietnamese military personnel, but most of them belonged to the military’s lowest echelons. The repatriates were overwhelmingly single men. Younger by a generation and most likely drafted in the war’s last years, these men did not echo Tru’s anticommunist politics or frame their choice for repatriation in an ideological idiom. As the UNHCR representative in Guam explained, “[They] aren’t concerned about the political change in their country. All they want to do is to get back to their families who are still in South Vietnam. Most can’t believe they’re really on Guam.” Julia Taft, the head of the Interagency Task Force, concurred. “They are almost all family reunion cases,” she explained. Taft also admitted that lower-level military personnel may have had little choice in their “evacuation.” She continued, “Some of them—air force mechanics and ships’ engineers—were forced to leave by superiors.” Many of these men had never intended to leave Vietnam permanently, and they recounted their journeys to Guam as plagued by misfortune, misinformation, and even kidnapping.

Repeatedly, repatriates who were ARVN pilots and sailors stated they had left South Vietnam in the heat of battle without realizing the finality of their actions. For example, when the North Vietnamese bombing began over Tan Son Nhut Airport, one pilot flew under orders to the U-Tapao Air Force Base in Thailand. He noted that “it was as much to save the aircraft from destruction as to help the people aboard.” He himself had not intended to evacuate: “Living forever in a foreign country and accepting another nationality is not my choice.” In a similar vein, a young sailor recounted, “I had no intention of going to the United States, but after I was aboard the ship, I was told we were headed for Subic Bay in the Philippines, and would not be returning to Vietnam.” He added that his parents, brothers, and sisters were in Vietnam, and that he wanted to return. This sense of displacement, and the remarkable lack of choice, is a recurring motif throughout the documents and Guamanian press. Focused more on family than politics, these young men presented themselves as alienated from both the journey that brought them to Guam and their current environment in the repatriate camp.

In the most chilling account, thirteen Vietnamese men charged the U.S. military with drugging and kidnapping them. Echoing the pilot’s story above, these men repeated how dozens of ARVN personnel stationed at Tan Son Nhut
Airport “were so afraid that we took immediate airlift to U-Tapao (Thailand).” On arrival, their story took a darker turn. At least sixty-five men requested to return to Vietnam. In response, U.S. and Thai troops threatened to send them to jail in Thailand. At this point, fifty-two of the holdouts agreed to go to Guam, while the remaining thirteen held steadfast, deciding “once and for all not to go [to Guam] and being killed or having a chance to go back to our country.”36 A U.S. military officer responded to this defiance by sedating these men with sodium pentathol and thorazine, and then loading them unconscious on a plane. When the men awoke in Guam’s Tent City, they were not only psychologically disoriented but physically dizzy and in pain. Several waited days before going for medical help, as they did not trust the U.S. doctors, and the doctors, in turn, did not believe the men’s claims until an examination of their legs, which were covered with puncture wounds and bruises.37 On investigation, the United States admitted a U.S. officer’s responsibility for the forced sedation.38 These men cast their lots with the repatriates and petitioned the U.S. officials: “This is a true story. . . . These acts made us very concerned and frighten[ed] and moreover we no longer trust and respect the American Peace and Democracy Policy that they expand throughout the world.”39 Unlike Tru, who emphasized his anticommunism, these men expressed their betrayal and lack of faith in the American discourse of democracy. If they had not been disillusioned with the U.S. military before April 1975, their subsequent experiences at the hands of frantic U.S. officers in Thailand certainly did the trick. Still, this did not directly translate into a communist or revolutionary position, and they too publicly refrained from identifying themselves with the new government.

Along with these accounts of kidnapping and forced circumstances, individual accounts revealed elusive examples of decision making based on singular family experiences and divided political loyalties. In one case at Fort Chaffee, a woman applied for repatriation for herself and her one-year-old child, while her husband opted to remain in the United States. This led to a custody dispute, which had to be resolved in Arkansas.40 To what extent the desires for divorce or repatriation were intertwined was left open for speculation; however, this internal message suggested the complexity and gendered politics of “family reunification.” Other men and women fully intended to leave Vietnam, but once stateside, rethought their decisions because of homesickness.41 In the most overtly political example in the archives, at least one man seems to have returned for ideological reasons. In an evocative anecdote from Tru’s memoir, Chau Van Hoa confided in Tru that he had followed the refugees to the United
States on the orders of the NLF. Seeming to justify American fears of possible communist infiltration, Hoa was ultimately a poor spy. Tired of waiting at Fort Chaffee with no orders or mission, he decided to return to his family and applied for repatriation along with hundreds of other Vietnamese.42

The rapidity of South Vietnam’s collapse, the frantic nature of final military orders, and the chaotic separation of families defined the stories of evacuation. Other than Tran Dinh Tru, it is hard to account for their individual sensibilities or political histories within Vietnam, yet repatriates consistently rejected a simplistic revolutionary or anticommmunist stance. Instead repatriates expressed their desire to return to Vietnam in the idiom of family and home. Their decisions to remain in Guam and petition for repatriation attested to a political contingency outside the Cold War vocabulary, which the U.S. and Vietnamese governments had not anticipated. Far from a cohesive or unified political community, what repatriates had in common was confusion, apprehension, and soon anger about their detention in Guam.

“We are not POWs”

Consolidated on Guam in physical and political limbo, repatriates mobilized collectively through increasingly militant actions.43 Although physically and legally confined in camps, these men and women demonstrated political skills, fierce determination, and independent motivations that the American press did not attribute to Vietnamese refugees at large. In fact, photographs in the popular media overwhelmingly represented Vietnamese refugees through images of children, often with their mothers, mapping an ideology of innocence, femininity, and “new beginnings” onto their bodies.44 In contrast, the repatriates were overwhelmingly male, and their oppositional decisions and actions created an ideological problem for American policymakers. The repatriates’ highly symbolic demonstrations and destructive acts revealed a political sensibility and agency that was multidirectional and astute. On the one hand, repatriates seemed to stage-manage actions for the benefit of revolutionary Vietnam in order to burnish their own “revolutionary” credentials, while on the other hand, walkouts, protests, and growing desperation seemed to be collective outbursts of frustration with U.S. officials, Guam, and the U.S. military. Repatriate leaders recognized that they needed to persuade both the U.S. officials and the Vietnamese governments of their cause and apolitical motivations; however, this was an unpredictable and precarious balancing act at best.

In response to the first Vietnamese petitioners, the UNHCR quickly and responsively set up procedures for individuals interested in repatriation. It conducted interviews and emphasized individuals’ choices free of any coercion. As
Guam’s UNHCR representative George Gordon Lennox stated, “This decision is theirs alone to make. . . . nobody will ever be forced to do anything they don’t want to. This should be made clear.” The UNHCR also began a concerted campaign to advertise the possibility of repatriation to refugees already on U.S. military bases in Pennsylvania, Florida, Arkansas, and California. In total, more than 1,500 Vietnamese on Guam inquired about repatriation, along with several hundred Vietnamese already in the continental United States. Throughout this process, the United States repeatedly affirmed the possibility of repatriation and its belief in “freedom of movement for all people.” With the policy in place, men and women began to come forward collectively and individually, but for all the U.S. goodwill, officials seemed unprepared for the complex problems and questions repatriates’ political demands would bring.

One of the first organized demonstrations was at Fort Chaffee in Arkansas where approximately 180 individuals applied for repatriation. From this group, a cohort of just under 80 people publicly protested what they viewed as delays in their departure. The repatriates were nonviolent, but U.S. officials feared they could turn hostile. Le Minh Tan, a forty-four-year-old former defense attaché for the U.S. military in Saigon, became the most visible and vocal repatriate leader. Calling on American strength, he insisted that if the United States prioritized the repatriates’ transfer, it could happen very quickly: “We are upset and we are mad. The American government is very rich and has very, very many planes.” Unlike many repatriates, he framed his protest not just as a desire to return to his family but as a rebuke against the United States. In fluid and succinct English, he argued: “It [Fort Chaffee] looks like a jail. We are very sad. We want to go back [to Vietnam] immediately. We don’t want to stay. I frankly say that we’ve been in jail for the two months that we’ve been in the United States.” His speeches alarmed not just U.S. personnel on the base but also many Vietnamese refugees at Fort Chaffee who feared the repatriates would sully their image and create resentment in the American public. In response, a second protest organized against the repatriates. Their signs proclaimed, “We are grateful to Americans” and “We ourselves look to Freedom.” Using the political rhetoric familiar to them, the counterdemonstrators labeled the repatriates as Viet Cong “agents.” In a 1977 history, Pham Kim Vinh, a Vietnamese academic and recent refugee himself, argued that communist infiltrators, and Tan in particular, played on refugees’ homesickness and encouraged repatriation for its propaganda value. Tan responded sharply to these charges, “If we were communists we would never come to the United States, or if we were communists we would stay in the United States and send information back to Vietnam. . . . We are not Communists. We just love our country and want to return.”
Tan’s rhetoric and the counterdemonstrators’ liberal use of “communist” may have raised some eyebrows among U.S. officials. On the most basic level, Vietnamese refugees’ facility with English spoke to their close ties with the U.S. military. Large numbers of the Vietnamese refugees, both repatriates and those who chose to resettle in the United States, could communicate in English, while the U.S. military was desperate for good Vietnamese translators in Guam and in Arkansas. It also should not be surprising that the counterdemonstrators wielded the “Viet Cong” epithet at the repatriates. While few of the repatriates identified with the revolutionary government or had been part of the NLF, the communist-anticommunist dichotomy was the imperfect political framework that had governed both Americans and many South Vietnamese for more than a decade. Tan’s own denials may also have appeared somewhat suspect. For Americans, many who had always distrusted their South Vietnamese counterparts, Tan may have seemed an all-too-familiar figure, a troublemaker (or more ominously a VC) masquerading as a friend. Regardless, the U.S. military worried that violence could escalate on repatriate flights to Camp Pendleton, and it authorized U.S. Air Force security police to carry sidearms on board. Armed and on the alert, they were instructed to “maintain order” if repatriates initiated any political demonstrations in-flight.

The Americans’ fears of unrest proved well-founded, and over the summer, the repatriates’ protests on Guam escalated. Many of the repatriates’ tactics seemed firmly aimed at the revolutionary government in Vietnam. In their first petition to the UNHCR, they self-consciously privileged the language of nation and nationalism over personal family reunification. The petition began by emphasizing that they had “not lost a country, rather a new regime has taken over the government.” Second, they wanted to “help with their country’s reconstruction,” and only third did they state a desire to be reunited with their families. This discursive rhetoric was matched by visual images, namely, the prominent display of Ho Chi Minh’s iconic visage at repatriates’ protests and nationalist events. During an organized event, repatriates stood at attention under the large portrait and a banner declaring, “Tinh Than Cu Ho Chi Minh Bat Diet,” or “The Spirit of Ho Chi Minh lasts forever.” Particularly anomalous given its presence on a U.S. military base in 1975, the images of Ho Chi Minh could be seen as a direct rebuke of the United States and the U.S. war in Vietnam. However, more likely, the Ho Chi Minh paintings acted as an easily legible signal directed at the PRG in South Vietnam and the DRV in the North. In all probability, the goal was to convince the PRG that the repatriates would be loyal members of socialist Vietnam.
In Tru’s memoir, he wrote explicitly about the Ho Chi Minh portraits and his own shame in their prominent display. A generation older than the majority of the repatriates, Tru stood apart in both age and rank, and he identified strongly with his family’s Catholicism and anticommunism. In a tone both sympathetic and condescending, Tru criticized the strategic use of Ho Chi Minh’s image: “We shouldn’t be surprised at opportunists like Binh [the artist], because in reality it was just play acting. These opportunists didn’t mean to propagandize for Communism, for they themselves didn’t know at all what Communism was.” While dismissive, Tru’s analysis of the images corresponded to a popular recognition among repatriates that the burden would be on them to prove their loyalty to the new revolutionary government.

Repatriates may have hoped that an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the U.S. military would be seen favorably in Vietnam, but they also aimed many of their actions firmly at an American and Guamanian audience. The repatriates believed the United States had the power to return them to Vietnam and was simply stalling. On his arrival in Guam, Le Minh Tan immediately organized a two-day hunger strike. Two hundred and fifty individuals participated, and the military reported that it served meals to only twenty women and children in the camp. In one memorable photograph, an elderly couple posed holding a handwritten sign declaring simply, “We are on Hunger Strike.” The juxtaposition of their aged bodies and faces with the defiant sign lent a moving image to the repatriates’ cause.

Vietnamese repatriates made good use of their English-language skills, displaying signs and banners within the camps, and writing letters to the local newspapers. Perhaps the repatriates’ most powerful use of English was in their appropriation of “POW” to their own ends. As one sign stated baldly: “We Are Not POWs.” And while it was true, Vietnamese refugees were not POWs, their confinement and camp life struck a nerve with Vietnamese and American personnel alike. The military made a concerted effort to demilitarize the refugees’ living situations, but the barbed wire, military security, and indefinite waiting all made the distinctions between a refugee camp and a POW camp slimmer than the U.S. military may have liked to admit. Moreover, Vietnamese repatriates labeling themselves as “POWs” was a rhetorically powerful move. Quite distinct from the POWs Americans welcomed home in 1973, Vietnamese repatriates inverted Americans’ understanding of “rescue” and positioned themselves as the captives and the U.S. military as the captor.

Throughout the summer of 1975, the UNHCR officials made multiple visits to Hanoi and Saigon, inquiring about the possibilities and procedures of repatriation. At first the PRG seemed open to at least a small number of
The Vietnamese Repatriate Movement on Guam, 1975

repatriates, and the UNHCR proactively submitted applications to the new government in hopes of a quick resolution. However, after a matter of weeks, it was clear the PRG was not pursuing the repatriate question with any speed. In fact, the PRG held up individual applications, did not respond to repatriates’ requests, and if anything, became less receptive to repatriation over the summer.62 Instead, the PRG demanded direct negotiations with the United States and refused to settle the repatriate question through the UNHCR or a third country. It either wanted to avoid the repatriate question entirely or hoped the repatriates would allow the PRG some leverage and pressure the U.S. government to recognize the new government diplomatically. Internal conflicts between military and civilian factions were competing in South Vietnam, and with hunger, environmental devastation, economic upheaval, and huge casualties, the repatriates remained very low on the PRG’s priority list. In addition, the PRG feared that the United States “has infiltrated the repatriates with covert agents.”63

Despite the PRG’s negative response, by July the repatriates’ protests and agitation began to pay off on the ground on Guam. The UNHCR representatives, Governor Bordallo, and high-ranking U.S. officials invited repatriate leaders to a meeting. Here the repatriates were at the table and able to question and pressure officials directly. By including the repatriates in the dialogue, the United States and UNHCR indicated how far from POWs the repatriates in fact were, yet there were no easy answers. At this meeting, the governor first suggested his solution, namely, give the repatriates a ship to return to Vietnam under their own power. The repatriates responded enthusiastically and added that many were skilled seamen. At this point, the UNHCR representatives were noncommittal and promised only to pass this idea to the High Commission.64 In addition, the UNHCR talks were at a standstill, because the United States refused to recognize either the PRG or the DRV or to engage in direct negotiations.

The Vietnamese repatriates responded to the impasse by challenging U.S. authority and rejecting their militarized detention. Even with new access and the relatively amicable meeting with U.S. and UNHCR officials, Le Minh Tan led 251 refugees off the Naval Communications Station where they were held and walked more than half a mile off the base. The repatriates carried their belongings in bags and boxes and seemed prepared to leave the base permanently. One repatriate wore a T-shirt with the ominous slogan, “Kill us or

Figure 3.
A U.S. military photographer documented a repatriate demonstration that prominently displayed the image of Ho Chi Minh. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.
send back” blazoned across the front.65 Violating the U.S. military perimeter, the repatriates upped the ante. Using nightsticks and mace, the marshals and police herded the repatriates into buses and drove them back to Orote Point where they isolated Tan from the group.

Then the next day a second group of repatriates deserted the camp located in the Hawaiian Dredging Company. Two hundred individuals marched with their hands tied behind their backs to symbolize their imprisonment. Self-consciously proclaiming their presence to a public audience, they stood in front of Shakey’s Pizza, the largest pizzeria on Guam, in front of rush-hour traffic, again wearing T-shirts displaying political slogans. In conjunction, five hundred more repatriates marched off the Black Construction Company camp with red ribbons and signs that read “We are not prisoners of war.” These protests were notable for their coordination and focus. The repetitive comparison to POWs alongside their deliberate move out of the camps highlighted not just their readiness to return home but their anger with their confinement in U.S. camps. Their protests gained momentum as repatriates nimbly pressed U.S. officials’ buttons and pressured U.S., UNHCR, and Guamanian officials despite the constraints of their militarized environment and legal position. Notably, Lam Duoi, a camp leader, who until that point had spoken to the press in both French and English, now insisted on speaking only in Vietnamese. Another repatriate leader and former Air Force major, Le Van Hai, said “he and his fellow campmates were treated like prisoners.”66

The United States responded to these coordinated protests by consolidating all of the repatriates at Camp Asan where they could be collectively monitored and policed on military property.67 Now clearly detained and under suspicion, the repatriates debated effective tactics and attempts at gaining public sympathy. Yet again, the political moment was contingent, and repatriates vacillated and debated effective strategies. The protests created dissension within the group, with a more “moderate” cohort urging greater diplomacy and patience, while a more aggressive faction advocated violence. These divisions could be witnessed by the competing signs repatriates erected within the camp. One sign urged politely, “Dear Guamanian and American People, Our desire is only to go home. We don’t want to disturb you and to be lost your sympathy that would be reserved for us. Please understand that how painful we are now and try to support our repatriation.” Another billboard demanded less amiably, “Hunger strike until die.”68 Repatriates also continued a series of hunger strikes, and one man threatened to slice off his own finger in protest and write a letter to President Gerald Ford in his own blood.69 Other repatriates remained at Camp Pendleton in California, and they too began a more aggressive campaign to
The Vietnamese Repatriate Movement on Guam, 1975

join the cohort in Guam. Another individual threatened to self-immolate, a highly potent image that invoked the anti-Diem, Buddhist immolations in 1963. Throughout these protests, repatriates consistently returned to the “Ship Option.”

The frustration mounted, and by the last week of August, two hundred to three hundred of the sixteen hundred repatriates staged a protest that became violent, complete with rock throwing, Molotov cocktails, and pipe wielding. At its climax, repatriates burned down two barracks within the repatriate camp and destroyed military property. Their anger and frustration turned against the camp itself. In response to the melee, U.S. marshals resorted to tear gas, and the U.S. military ordered a U.S. Marine action unit on alert. In the end, repatriates injured four U.S. marshals. The U.S., UNHCR, and Guamanian officials were desperate for a resolution.

“Guam: The Devil’s Island”

As repatriates’ protests escalated, Guam’s territorial status grated on the Guamanian government and even confounded the U.S. military. Guam’s isolated geography and colonial history shaped U.S. and Guamanian officials’ political constraints and possibilities, and because the U.S. political system did not generally recognize Guam’s existence, much was left to improvisation. In the short run, Guamanian officials became increasingly frustrated by their own limited authority. They wanted nothing more than to be rid of the repatriate problem once and for all, and Governor Bordallo threatened to take the matter into his own hands:

The lives of the people of Guam are in jeopardy. Immediate action is imperative. . . . the repatriates advised me that they will initiate a series of violent acts at the risk of their lives if they are not moved to Vietnam immediately. . . . If I do not receive word from you concerning this matter within 48 hours, I shall proceed unilaterally with the latter alternative.

The U.S. response to the governor was curt, to say the least. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger urged Bordallo to limit his meetings with the repatriates, since he had no power to grant their demands. In conjunction with this dispute, Guam’s speaker of the house Joseph Ada seemed personally insulted by the repatriates, and he characterized the protests as “an affront to the hospitality which has been freely offered them.” In Resolution No. 133, Ada formally proposed the repatriates be removed to Wake Island, an even smaller and more remote unincorporated territory in America’s generally forgotten Pacific archipelago. Ada argued that the repatriates posed a safety hazard to local civilians and a
threat to Guam’s international reputation. The Guamanian Senate concurred and voted twenty to one in overwhelming favor of this proposal. However, this near unanimous vote to forcibly deport the repatriates in fact underscored the Guamanian government’s lack of sovereignty. The Interagency Task Force on Refugees, an unelected federal task force, shot down the “Wake option” as untenable.

In this volatile mix, the U.S. military commander, Rear Admiral Kent J. Carroll, also wrestled with Guam’s political status and weighed the possibility of committing federal troops to quell civil unrest under “Operation Garden Plot.” Garden Plot was the military’s somewhat Orwellian code name for the plan which authorized military control over a civil disturbance. The military protocol clearly stated that Garden Plot could not be launched without explicit presidential approval. Hamstrung by the need for presidential review, Carroll argued the “normal civil disturbance rules cannot be easily applied to Guam.” He continued, “Garden Plot procedures are not appropriate for emergency situations in U.S. territories.” In essence, the United States did not have a game plan for a civil disturbance on Guam, because it had never considered it. For ex-
ample, the FBI did not include Guam in its purview, nor did the CIA, and thus there was essentially no ability to gather intelligence on Guam. Guam's imperial history left it quite literally outside the purview of the law and U.S. military directives, and Admiral Carroll, the commanding officer on the ground, wanted to be able to take action. He repeatedly urged his colleagues in Washington, D.C., to grant him the authority to order troops into the repatriate camps if hostilities flared again. In the end, Carroll's superiors in Washington did not agree and refused his requests to act without presidential approval. Removed from the day-to-day conflict, they recognized the risk of overreaction and feared the possible media and international fallout if U.S. troops were firing on Vietnamese refugees on Guam. While cooler heads prevailed, Carroll’s frustration and desperation underscored Guam’s nebulous status and the constant threat of military power even in a humanitarian operation.

By September 30 the UNHCR announced that negotiations had broken down with the PRG. No hope remained that the PRG or DRV would willingly welcome or facilitate repatriates’ resettlement in Vietnam. The U.S. military prepared to initiate Operation Garden Plot in anticipation of rioting, violence, and general unrest.
To prevent the expected escalation, President Ford stepped forward and approved the use of the ship *Thuong Tin I*, a Vietnamese commercial ship that had initially carried refugees to Guam, for the repatriates.80 The Vietnamese at Camp Asan responded with celebration. The photos on the front page of the *Pacific Daily News* showed jubilant, shirtless young men in shorts rushing out into the night, jumping in the air.81 At the most basic level, the repatriates succeeded in their mission; they had adeptly pressured the U.S. government to give them a ship. Presumably weighing their options and evaluating the potential public relations disaster of all-out rioting by Vietnamese refugees on Guam, indefinite detention camps on Guam or Wake Island, or forced removal to the continental United States, the U.S. government had finally conceded that the Ship Option was its best course of action. Over the next three weeks, Vietnamese sailors and captains worked on the ship with enthusiasm, conducted sea trials, and packed needed food and water stores for thirty days for sixteen hundred people.82 The UNHCR, frustrated by the PRG’s intransigence, refused to throw its support behind the Ship Option. It simply could not guarantee the well-being of the repatriates on arrival.

To best protect the repatriates on return, the United States ordered its officials to “play down the U.S. role” and remain on the sidelines. It wanted to avoid any appearance of U.S. control and allow the operation to appear fully Vietnamese. U.S. officials recognized that the PRG viewed the repatriates with great suspicion, seeing them as tainted by the U.S. imperialists. There was to be no “formal, send-off ceremony” and no fanfare from U.S. or Guamanian representatives. Any final event was to be “strictly a repatriate show.”83

The U.S. government’s and UNHCR’s fears proved well-founded, and the PRG framed the repatriates’ return and the Ship Option as a violation of its nascent sovereignty and power. In the months after Saigon’s collapse, the PRG desired U.S. diplomatic recognition and its attending legitimacy and benefits. Angered that the United States refused to recognize its government or negotiate directly, the PRG lashed out at the *Thuong Tin I* and the repatriates. With seemingly tone-deaf political ears, the PRG denounced the repatriate ship as a “sinister scheme.”

This is a new crime against the Vietnamese people. . . . The PRG calls on the patriots now forced to live abroad to be aware of the bad intention of the United States, and to unite with one another to protect themselves and the nation’s sovereignty against all wicked actions of U.S. imperialism. The PRG formally demands that the U.S. government stop settling the question of “refugees” in its own way.84
The North Vietnamese government also characterized the event as an “adventurous and irresponsible action. . . . The U.S. government has made a big mistake by acting unilaterally and arbitrarily in the matter.” In conversations with the UNHCR, the PRG, and DRV repeatedly feared that the U.S. government was using the repatriates as a ploy to return CIA agents to its territory. While seemingly paranoid and unsympathetic to the repatriates’ own claims, the PRG was in a fragile state and skeptical of any unilateral U.S. action. In short, the PRG argued that the United States was forcing a marginal, and potentially subversive, population on its borders and violating its own right to determine who could and could not enter the country. Repatriates had been successful in their campaign, yet at this juncture, they confronted a hostile Vietnamese government and a tenuous political ground.

While the repatriates prepared for return, the U.S. officials publicized the PRG and DRV’s aggressive statements to the camps. They wanted repatriates to recognize the PRG’s public animosity against their cause. The repatriates recognized the risks, but most hoped for the best. As one man explained, “When we go back we have to obey the orders of our government. . . . We think that when we go back we must attend the reeducation program because we were all the employees of the former regime.”

Before boarding the ship, the United States provided one last chance for the repatriates to change their minds and travel to the United States rather than Vietnam. U.S. officials feared that the constraints of Camp Asan had forced an “uncommon solidarity” among the repatriates, and they wanted to provide one final “bail-out” option for repatriates who “secretly may want to remain.” Approximately twenty-four hours before departure, individual families encountered one final, elaborately stage-managed, “counseling session” complete with secret rooms and doors. Twenty-eight repatriates changed their minds and opted not to board the \textit{Thuong Tin I}, and instead went to the United States. Interestingly, Le Minh Tan, the repatriate leader from Fort Chaffee, was among the repatriates who decided to return to the United States, even after he had led successive hunger strikes and protests. Tran Dinh Tru commented that Tan’s decision proved that he had been a CIA spy all along. While it is impossible from the archival documents to learn Tan’s actual motivations, it is worth noting he was charged with being both a communist infiltrator and a CIA agent. These contradictory charges demonstrated the paranoia and binaries that had infiltrated Vietnamese citizens at all levels from the PRG government to the repatriates themselves.

In total, 1,546 Vietnamese boarded the boat, including 250 women and children. In an almost comical conclusion, the repatriate leaders had forgot-
ten the portrait of Ho Chi Minh in the camp, and they wanted to display it on the ship. U.S. marines promptly went to retrieve the picture and carried it to the ship, creating a contradictory and rather unseemly picture of U.S. marines side by side with Ho Chi Minh. A public affairs officer cognizant of the potentially embarrassing photo-op ordered them to drop the painting and asked the repatriates to bring it on board themselves. On October 17, 1975, the ship left the dock without a named port or a guarantee from the PRG that it would be allowed to land on Vietnamese soil. When the ship arrived in southern Vietnam in November, the PRG imprisoned the repatriates in a Vietnamese military camp in Dong De near Nha Trang. Never making international news, the repatriates could easily be “disappeared” into the network of reeducation camps throughout southern Vietnam. Tran Dinh Tru remembered being taken ashore and listening to a speech about how he had been “brainwashed by the American imperialists.” Vietnamese officials then interrogated him and charged him, as the captain, with leading an American plot against Vietnam.

Ironically, if tragically, the repatriates in fact became prisoners of war. Their earlier protests and slogans aimed at the Americans that they were not POWs transformed into the sad reality that the PRG, and then the reunified government of Vietnam, classified them as former enemies and suspect citizens. In Tru’s memoir, he recounted more than twelve years in a forced labor camp in Vietnam, which broke both his body and his spirit. Based on my sources, it is impossible to know for how long other repatriates were interned in Vietnamese “reeducation camps.” While Tru may have been punished more harshly because of his high position in the RVN Navy and as the Thuong Tin I captain, the reeducation camps were generally characterized by their starvation diets and arbitrary brutality. After the first six months of Tru’s imprisonment, the revolutionary government allowed him to write to his family, and his wife began sending periodic supplies to support him in prison. Six years later, the government permitted his wife to visit him at a reeducation camp in the north. Tru felt horribly about the hardship and expense of her trip, because the resources she was sending him meant his children had less to eat. He wrote extensively about forced labor, starvation diets, constant surveillance, and communist “reeducation.”

The years went by and we were still living in a very strange world, like insects, like wild animals, in extreme conditions, our clothes in tatters, toiling under the barrels of the AK-47s. Sometimes I had a nightmare and woke up in a cold sweat, but when looking around I saw that reality was even more terrifying, and that we were living in the most horrendous place on the planet.
He concluded, “Rage boiled up inside me. If I had chosen to go to America, I would have been able to support my family. And now it was too late. I could only blame it on my fate.”¹⁰⁰ He, at least, was released on February 13, 1988, when he was finally reunited with his wife. Three years later he applied to the Humanitarian Operation (HO) program and left Vietnam for the United States, this time with his wife and children.

Conclusion

At its core, the history of the Vietnamese repatriates emphasizes the dynamics of contingency alongside the tenacity of American empire. On one level, it is a provocative and clear refutation of the dominant public narrative of Vietnamese migration. Far from passive, hopeless, or vacant recipients of aid and goodwill, the repatriates displayed an impressive array of political skills and organizing strategies. The photographs of Vietnamese refugees, on U.S. military bases no less, wielding images of Ho Chi Minh and shaving their heads remain stunning. These images appeared widely in Guam’s newspapers, but those in the continental United States did not reproduce them, and the military’s photography remained only in After Action Reports and catalogued in the archives. Moreover, their political organization and cogent recognition of their American audience spoke to the repatriates’ savvy and resourceful knowledge. Their stories highlighted the balancing act these men and women performed between the twin poles of communist and anticommunist discourse, yet ultimately they failed to avoid these dichotomies in the face of an insecure and vengeful revolutionary Vietnam.

At the same time, the repatriates’ stories challenge scholars to recognize the implications of “marginal” places on the periphery of America’s empire. Vietnamese repatriates’ stories draw attention to Guam and its use as a refugee camp and detention site. Its history brings into relief the interconnections between empire, U.S. military bases, deportation, and detention. These cross-currents of empire and migration have resulted in unpredictable circuits, but ones that ultimately inform one another and resonate in the contemporary moment.

Vietnamese repatriates were far from the only population to find themselves “in between” the legacies of empire and war. The anthropologist David Vine has written a gripping new book on how the British government deported the indigenous population of Chagossians from Diego Garcia to make way for a U.S. naval base in the Indian Ocean. The Chagossian population is barred from living, visiting, or working on the island, while the base is now central to U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan and the Middle East.¹⁰¹ Perhaps most
visibly, the U.S. government transformed the naval base in Guantánamo Bay (GTMO), which tellingly shares Guam’s 1898 history, into a detention center for alleged “enemy combatants” in 2002. However, even before September 11, GTMO was a controversial refugee camp where the United States detained Cubans and Haitians. After the 2010 Haitian earthquake, the U.S. government again prepared GTMO as a refugee camp in a clear echo from the 1990s. Finally, Guam has also been used as a way station for refugees in the post–Cold War era. At the end of the 1991 Gulf War, the U.S. government couriered Iraqi Kurds seeking asylum for “processing” to the isolated Andersen Air Force Base in Guam, before resettling them in the United States. This route between Iraq, Guam, and the United States remains an active possibility for at-risk Iraqi translators and U.S. allies in the present. As a result, rather than seeming anomalous or illustrating a singular potent story, the history of the Vietnamese repatriates on Guam foreshadows the multiple convergences between military and migrant operations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The unacknowledged histories of U.S. empire reverberate in the present, and these populations in between, in transit, or in detention reveal the stickiness of empire and the contingent politics of the people in between. While disparate and clearly distinct, one can imagine Chagossians, GTMO detainees, Iraqi Kurds, Haitian earthquake victims, and Vietnamese repatriates mapping the circuits and contours of American military empire.

The repatriates’ complicated, dynamic, and at times tragic stories underscore the need to challenge monolithic narratives of rescue and of revolution. On Guam, away from their families, and from their perspective neither here nor there, the repatriates made choices, for better or for worse, with the knowledge available at the time. Their choices became fraught with anger, hope, despair, good luck and bad—that is to say, that rather than adhere to American narratives of rescue or Vietnamese narratives of anti-imperialism, the repatriates’ stories reveal the messiness of contingency and the precarious politics for those in between.

Notes
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1. Bob Cobble, untitled image, September 13, 1975, NARA, RG 319 Records of the Army Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, Records Re: Operations New Life and New Arrivals, 1975–76. Hereafter cited as RG 319, box 19. (All photographic images included in this article can be found in NARA, RG 319, Box 19.)


4. The southern PRG and the northern DRV coexisted in concert, but as separate governments until reunification in 1976.


18. In contrast, the United States permitted direct elections for governor of Puerto Rico beginning in 1948. Guam also gained a nonvoting delegate in Congress in 1972.


27. Ibid., iii.


30. Ibid., 76–91.


42. Tran Dinh Tru, Vietnam Thuong Tin, 305–9.
43. The subhead for this section is from Chips Quinn, “Repatriates Plan for Strike Today,” PDN, July 11, 1975.
46. Hendrick, “Refugees Waiting to Return.”
52. Dennis Carroll, Operation New Life, 17.
75. Secretary of State to RUMTBK/AmEmbassy Bangkok, Re: Repatriates, July 23, 1975, RG 59, 1975STATE170895.
79. Civil Disturbance Plan—Garden Plot.
83. Secretary of State to JCS, Repatriate Ship, October 17, 1975; Secretary of State to RUHNSAA/CINCPACREP, Re: Plan for Public Affairs Handling of Vietnamese Repatriate on Guam, October 12, 1975. All documents in RG 319, box 16, folder Message Traffic for Repatriate Situation on Guam.
86. Secretary of State to AmEmbassy Helsinki, Re: Action Memorandum: repatriation of Vietnamese Refugees, September 4, 1975, RG 59, 1975STATE208902.
89. Secretary of State to CINCPAC, Re: Meeting with Repatriate Leadership Committee, October 9, 1975, RG 59, 1975STATE241102; Secretary of State to CG Fort Chaffee, et al., re: Guidance on Counseling Repatriates, October 2, 1975, RG 59, 1975STATE235686; Julia Taft to Admiral Carroll, Re: Guidance on Our Processing and Departure of Repatriate Ship, October 13, 1975, RG 319, box 16, folder Message Traffic for Repatriate Situation on Guam.
90. Secretary of State to CINCPACREP GUAM, RE: Final Out-Processing Procedures for Camp Asan Repatriates, Preliminary Scenario, October 10, 1975, RG 59, 1975STATE242815.
91. Ibid.
92. Secretary of State to CINCPACREP Guam, Re: Repatriates, October 21, 1975, RG 59, 1975STATE249847.
93. COMNAVMARIANAS Guam to RHMBR/CINCPACFLT Re: Return of VN Repatriates by Ship—Sitrep Seven, October 9, 1975, RG 319, box 16, folder Message Traffic for Repatriate Situation on Guam.
94. Tran Dinh Tru, Vietnam Thuong Tin, 292.
96. December 13, 1975 Subj: Vietnamese repatriates in Nha Trang, RG 319, box 2, folder Situation Summaries December 13 – 30, 1975. Thompson, Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 66–73. See also Freeman, Hearts of Sorrow; Toai and Chanoff, Vietnamese Gulag; Vo, Bamboo Gulag; Pham, Eaves of Heaven.
98. I’d like to thank the participants in the 2010 NYU Symposium on the Politics and Poetics of Refugees for sharpening this insight.
100. Ibid., 402.