

Southern New Hampshire University

China Elephants and Orphans:

Operation Babylift and  
the White Savior Complex

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in History

By

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## Abstract

As the Vietnam War drew to a close during the spring of 1975, the United States determined it had a responsibility to save South Vietnam's at-risk children from the communists. Americans largely pushed for this humanitarian act as a chance to do one thing right in Vietnam. Collaborating with Western-run orphanages in Vietnam, the U.S. initiated Operation Babylift evacuated thousands of children. This was not without consequences, some of which are still felt today. The evacuation was an emotional event that captivated the United States at the end of a long war. It is also an historic example of white savior complex at work.

As a subconscious aspect of Western culture, the white savior complex enables white people to take the actions they deem best in helping non-white people. They then benefit from the experiences, while potentially doing nothing about the systemic causes of the problems they temporarily address. The white savior complex played a key role in the conception of Operation Babylift and creating the need for it through years of American intervention in Vietnam. Applying Teju Cole's "White Savior Industrial Complex" framework with Jordan Flaherty and Caitlin Breedlove's savior mentality concepts to the Western individuals and entities involved in Operation Babylift will illustrate their motivations and the outcomes, both negative and positive. This analysis will demonstrate why and how Operation Babylift came to fruition, played out, and concluded for the benefit of white Westerners. It will also highlight long-term, systematic repercussions faced by non-white people when the white savior complex is not acknowledged. The evidence will illustrate for white Westerners the importance of making informed decisions in helping non-white people by decentering themselves from their privilege and acknowledging their cultural understandings and motivations.

**Dedication**

*For Vietnam*

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## Preface

*It is nice to see you Americans bringing home souvenirs of our country as you leave—  
china elephants and orphans. Too bad some of them broke today, but we have plenty  
more.*

— A South Vietnamese lieutenant to *New York Times* journalist

Malcolm W. Browne after the Air Force Galaxy C-5A crash, April 4, 1975<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm W. Browne, “A Deep Bitterness Toward U.S.,” *New York Times*, April 05, 1975, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/05/archives/a-deep-bitterness-toward-us.html>.

## Acknowledgments

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I would like to express my deep gratitude for those who introduced me to Vietnamese culture and history. Duke, thank you for all you have shared with me over the years about Vietnam, for answering my many questions, and providing me with great resources. Andrew X. Pham, your books on Vietnam played no small role in inspiring me. To my friends in Vietnam, I am grateful for your willingness to always share your world with me.

To Bob Irvine and Stephanie Averill, thank you for being exceptional professors and for answering my every question with enthusiasm and honesty during this process. Thank you also to Jeannine Thibodeau, the best proofreader this side of Sunnydale. I am grateful to Dana Sachs, who graciously met with me to discuss my thesis and her extensive research on Operation Babylift. To those directly involved in Operation Babylift who participated in interviews for this project, I thank you for your time, candor, and willingness to share your stories.

Jonathan Patrick Thompson

February 1, 2019



## **List of Abbreviations**

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DOD	Department of Defense
FCVN	Friends of the Children of Viet Nam
FFAC	Friends For All Children
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government (Following the Fall of Saigon)
RVN	Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

## Introduction

In April 1975, two years after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and the official withdrawal of the United States military from Vietnam, the North Vietnamese began rapidly approaching victory over South Vietnam. As the communist arrival loomed over the capital city of Saigon, Western-run orphanages worked with private individuals and the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments to start evacuating children for adoption and resettlement in the U.S. and other Western nations. The orphanages housed not only orphans of war, but also children who were separated from their parents and for whom the orphanages served as temporary foster care. They also housed Amerasians, children born to Vietnamese mothers and American military fathers, who often abandoned them. Saving these children from the communist threat and the much-anticipated massacre thought to befall the South became paramount for those on the ground in Vietnam and Americans in the States. As a result, Operation Babylift was born, which saw between 2,000 and 3,000 children airlifted out of South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

For many, Operation Babylift appears to have been an unprecedented act by the United States. Today, the idea of such an evacuation of children seems unfathomable. In a 2005 interview with historian Dana Sachs, Cherie Clark, an orphanage director involved in the evacuation, shared her thoughts:

To think that we would just airlift out two thousand of some other country's kids and just say, 'Yeah, yeah. We got papers on them, we'll give 'em to you later, I trust this guy.' No,

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

it just seems obscene, legally, to me. And it seems very presumptuous that America would participate, and the government would do that.<sup>2</sup>

While the event was generally celebrated in the United States, it was also met with concern and opposition. Not only were many of the children not orphans, but it appeared as though the U.S. was simply trying to alleviate its own guilt under the guise of humanitarianism. The airlift may have seemed sudden, but the events and social constructs that led the U.S. to conduct it began well in advance of the war in Vietnam.

The white savior complex was an underlying, if not entirely subconscious, social and cultural belief that was a driving factor in white Westerners, specifically Americans, developing and executing Operation Babylift. This can be seen by applying author Teju Cole's white savior complex framework, which he calls the "White Savior Industrial Complex," to the event. Cole's concept was originally presented within the context of the actions of white people regarding Africa, yet it is applicable to many other areas and past events:

The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening; the banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm; this world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—of white people and Oprah; the White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of the white savior complex and its effects on non-white people is one that many Westerners struggle to understand. It is also new enough that it has not been widely used as a lens for reassessing historical events in which it played a direct role, like Operation Babylift.

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<sup>2</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Teju Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, March 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

The historical context behind the white savior complex and Operation Babylift both informed and perpetuated the American cultural trends and beliefs that made them possible. The experiences and victories of World War II incited the United States' growing sense of American exceptionalism, the belief that "America's values, political system, and history are unique and [...] that the United States is both destined and entitled to play a distinct and positive role on the world stage."<sup>4</sup> This was compounded by another, earlier cultural belief born out of Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, "The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands." The white man's burden is an imperialistic concept that suggests that white people are morally obligated to rule over non-white people and aid them in advancing their cultures and improving their lives.<sup>5</sup> These social understandings became ingrained in white American culture, but also became increasingly subconscious, coming together as the white savior complex.

World War II not only perpetuated American exceptionalism, it also saw Americans begin to explore and participate in international adoption. According to Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist, after the war ended, "concern about the plight of orphaned children precipitated the first wave of international adoption to the USA..."<sup>6</sup> Americans began adopting orphans from countries including Germany and Japan. There became increasing demand and opportunity for international adoption, which coincided with the passage of the Displaced Persons Act of 1948,

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen M Walt, "The Myth of American Exceptionalism," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, accessed December 01, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/the-myth-of-american-exceptionalism/>.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature 6th Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 808.

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist, "Operation Babylift or Babyabduction: Implications of the Hague Convention of the Humanitarian Evacuation and Rescue of Children," *International Social Work* 52, no. 5 (2009): 625, doi:10.1177/0020872809337677.

the first law to address children of war.<sup>7</sup> This would further support American interest in international adoption, which would again heighten during the Korean War in the early 1950s.

The Korean War was truly a precursor to Operation Babylift. Americans were not only fighting communism, the threat of which continued to plague the United States' psyche through the Vietnam War, but they were also finding themselves rewarded for their efforts through the Asian children they adopted. The large number of orphaned children became something of a commodity that Americans deeply desired. U.S.-based orphanages began working in Korea and “between the Korean War and the end of the century, Americans adopted approximately two-thirds of the 150,000 children that Korea sent overseas for adoption.”<sup>8</sup> During the Vietnam War, Americans continued adopting children in this manner. From 1963 to 1976, Americans adopted approximately 3,267 Vietnamese children, with 1,400 adoptions occurring toward the war's end, between 1970 to 1974.<sup>9 10</sup>

When it came time for the United States to officially leave Vietnam in 1975, Americans were gripped by intense concern over the Vietnamese children, fueled in part by continued interest in international adoption. As Dana Sachs describes, “Operation Babylift followed what

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<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist, “Operation Babylift or Babyabduction: Implications of the Hague Convention of the Humanitarian Evacuation and Rescue of Children,” *International Social Work* 52, no. 5 (2009): 625, doi:10.1177/0020872809337677.

<sup>8</sup> Arissa H. Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 2, [http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=987076&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_Cover](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=987076&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover).

<sup>9</sup> Allison Varzally, *Children of Reunion: Vietnamese Adoptions and the Politics of Family Migrations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 22. <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1462777&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development, *Operation Babylift: Report, Emergency Movement of Vietnamese and Cambodian Orphans for Intercountry Adoption, April-June, 1975* (Washington: Agency for International Development, 1975), 2, [http://www.forensicgenealogy.info/images/babies\\_report.pdf](http://www.forensicgenealogy.info/images/babies_report.pdf).

had, by then, become a familiar pattern: war creates orphans, and then civilized society steps in to help.”<sup>11</sup> For most Americans there was no doubt that Vietnamese children, especially Amerasians, would be better off in the U.S. The outcry for this, fueled by the white savior complex, was such that Operation Babylift became politically possible.

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Operation Babylift was a largely emotional event that captivated the United States at the end of an arduous war. As with so many other aspects of the conflict in Vietnam, it has captured the attention of many scholars and has been the center of historiographical debate. Operation Babylift is much more than a historical event—it is a learning opportunity. For this reason, scholars from varying fields have sought to investigate and contribute to its historiography. Many individuals, often authorities in their respective fields, have created a diverse pool of credible research that other scholars have continued to build on. Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist is a social work professor and authority on child welfare and human trafficking. Robert S. McKelvey, author of *The Dust of Life: America's Children Abandoned in Vietnam*, was a Marine Corps captain in Vietnam where he was educated in Vietnamese culture and language before becoming an academic child psychiatrist.<sup>12</sup> His book explores the mental health adjustment experiences of Amerasian children in both Vietnam and the United States. Allison Varzally, author of *Children of Reunion: Vietnamese Adoptions and the Politics of Family Migrations*, is a well-known and award-winning authority in the field of immigration and ethnic history.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>12</sup> Robert S. McKelvey, *The Dust of Life: America's Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Allison Varzally, *Children of Reunion: Vietnamese Adoptions and the Politics of Family Migrations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017),

Edward Zigler, author of “A Developmental Psychologist’s View of Operation Babylift,” served as the first director of the Office of Child Development under President Richard Nixon.<sup>14</sup> These scholars and others contribute informed perspectives that, in conjunction with primary sources, allow for the adequate application of the white savior complex lens. While many aspects of the event have been explored and analyzed, there is still room within the historiography to further examine, understand, and learn from it.

Within the established literature, gaps exist in that Operation Babylift is rarely discussed outside the realm of its own scholarly works and it has not been examined using the white savior complex. In many history books the event is mentioned in a few sentences, usually a brief footnote in a narrative about the larger war. Collectively, the Vietnam War is often made relevant today through comparison to American actions in more modern conflicts. Yet Operation Babylift is usually only made relevant when addressing the children involved who are now adults. Scholars have scrutinized the actions, motives, and outcomes of Operation Babylift. However, the privilege and cultural and racial views inherent to white Americans that collectively inspired their actions in “saving” these children have not been applied. Most scholars have focused their analyses on niche issues, but none have examined the event through the lens of the white savior complex. Doing so will prove that it played a role in making Operation Babylift possible and will also present new understandings of American actions, Vietnamese

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<http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1462777&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Zigler, “A Developmental Psychologist’s View of Operation Babylift,” *American Psychologist* 31, no. 5 (1976): 329–40,

<http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pdh&AN=1977-05641-001&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

responses, and how the event is still relevant and reflective of American motives and actions in the international arena today.

The application of the Cole's white savior complex framework will exemplify how privilege has historically enabled white people to act on what they believe to be right. It will also demonstrate how these actions directly benefited them despite the consequences for the non-white people involved. Operation Babylift is one of many past events facilitated by Western white culture that, when viewed through this lens, demonstrates the systemic and long-term repercussions faced by foreign groups as the result of "help" from white people. Operation Babylift also exemplifies what happens when White westerners take action but do not acknowledge the white savior complex or their true motivations. Understanding the role of this concept in this historical context will enable an understanding of white Westerner's motivations in helping those in other cultures. It will also exemplify and encourage the need for white Westerners to be more mindful and intentional in their efforts to assist non-white people.

The goal of applying the white savior complex to Operation Babylift is not to deter white people from helping others. Rather, it is to inform them about how their actions could potentially benefit them while doing nothing to combat the larger systemic issues causing the very problems they temporarily address. It seeks to reinforce the importance of the idea that white people should "first, own up to the motives that drive philanthropic interventions, so that personal catharsis does not subsume the real need of others. Second, consider the structural underpinnings and historical legacies that together sustain the very infrastructure of the problems that captivate our activist hearts."<sup>15</sup> In the context of Operation Babylift, to say that the children of Vietnam

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<sup>15</sup> Heather Laine Talley, *Saving Face: Disfigurement and the Politics of Appearance* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 128-129.



should be saved by Americans and brought to the U.S. puts white Westerners in the role of the hero, while overlooking the years of American involvement in Vietnam that helped orphan these children in the first place. Despite strong anti-war sentiment through the waning years of American military involvement in Vietnam, many Americans embraced Operation Babylift, which benefited them emotionally, while overlooking both their own actions in creating the need for the operation and the long-term negative effects it would have on Vietnam.

Operation Babylift may have appeared to be a sudden and unique result of the Vietnam War, but in truth, it was years in the making. America's need to save the Vietnamese from communism, and in many ways, themselves, created an even worse situation for the Vietnamese that Americans then prided themselves on saving them from. In many instances, the U.S. military turned the very civilians they were there to protect into refugees and orphans through conducting massacres, creating "free fire zones," and destroying villages.<sup>16 17 18</sup> Members of the military also fathered Amerasian children, most of whom were abandoned.<sup>19</sup> These children were often conceived through rape, affairs, or prostitution.<sup>20 21 22</sup> The growing number of orphans was largely ignored until the U.S. government saw a chance to leverage them for last minute military

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<sup>16</sup> Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017), 444.

<sup>17</sup> Kiernan, *Việt Nam*, 445.

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2017), 431.

<sup>19</sup> Robert S. McKelvey, *The Dust of Life: America's Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 102.

<sup>20</sup> McKelvey, *The Dust of Life*, 102.

<sup>21</sup> Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 19,

[http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_Cover](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover).

<sup>22</sup> Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 19.

aid to South Vietnam and Americans saw a chance to feel like they did something right as the communists approached victory.

The increasing number of orphans or children whose parents temporarily couldn't care for them led to fuller orphanages. In the Western-run orphanages, the staff often proved ill-informed about Vietnamese culture, were often unexperienced, and employed another facet of the white savior complex: their inherent belief that they knew better than the Vietnamese.<sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> This predominantly manifested in Operation Babylift, where the children were sent to the U.S. for a better life, despite many of them not actually being orphans and most arriving with no records of any kind, including dates of birth or names. Yet their arrival was celebrated by Americans, who not only got to feel like saviors but benefited from keeping the children.

In all these instances, the white savior complex lens offers new insight into Operation Babylift. Looking at the airlift through the white savior lens is intended to evidence how it caused past events to come to fruition, play out, and conclude. The debate is not whether or not the event was justified, but how cultural factors and ideologies enabled it to happen. Debates about the operation began almost as soon as the operation itself, and they will be discussed to an extent, but the focus of this thesis is on the cultural foundation from which Operation Babylift sprung. This event, when analyzed within the white savior complex framework, allows for a better understanding of contemporary white American motivations and actions that could negatively impact future actions and outcomes involving other cultures.

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<sup>23</sup> Tracy Johnston, "Torment over the Viet Non-orphans," *New York Times*, May 09, 1976, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/09/archives/torment-over-the-viet-nonorphans-nonorphans.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

## Chapter 1: The Origins of Operation Babylift

Operation Babylift transpired in April 1975 with great support from the American public, who had recently started advocating for South Vietnam's 879,000 orphans.<sup>1</sup> The term "orphan," in the case of Vietnam, is "a classification that included not just children of parents who had died, but any child without parents to raise them." In a *New York Times* article, Fox Butterfield defined the two categories of orphans: "In one group are the homeless street urchins who haunt downtown Saigon, Da Nang and other large cities, begging for change, shining shoes or stealing watches or wallets from unsuspecting Americans who seem to think they are cute. The other category are children of American GI fathers and Vietnamese mothers."<sup>2</sup> Of the two groups, American's were focused on the estimated 10,000 to 15,000 Amerasian orphans, abandoned by their American fathers if not by both parents completely.<sup>3</sup> As the likelihood of a North Vietnamese communist victory increased, so too did South Vietnamese and American fears that the Amerasians would be killed in a bloodbath.

The national push for action was undoubtedly inspired by genuine compassion. However, the urge to save these children, Amerasian or not, was, for the most part, void of any acknowledgement of American responsibility in creating the dire situation in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Fox Butterfield, "Orphans of Vietnam: One Last Agonizing Issue," *New York Times*, April 13, 1975, accessed December 01, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/13/archives/orphans-of-vietnam-one-last-agonizing-issue.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Tracy Johnston, "Torment over the Viet Non-orphans," *New York Times*, May 09, 1976, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/09/archives/torment-over-the-viet-nonorphans-nonorphans.html>.

Some scholars, politicians, members of the media, and even religious leaders argued against the operation, but Americans as a whole largely wanted to feel as though they were doing something to help. To achieve this, they evacuated and adopted Vietnamese children, allowing for a sense of national catharsis that was felt from the White House down to the average American family. While the efforts involved in Operation Babylift fit within the white savior complex framework, so too did the many actions taken by Americans, both in the U.S. and Vietnam, throughout the war as a whole. Years in advance of the airlift, the U.S. started creating the need behind the need for Operation Babylift and their future self-assigned role as saviors.

In order to adequately apply the white savior complex to Operation Babylift, it is necessary to first understand the role the United States played in creating the need for the operation in the first place. The U.S. military implemented deadly policies and practices in South Vietnam, greatly increasing the number of refugees and orphans. Their actions also drove many of these refugees to larger cities, where they struggled to survive. This resulted in higher homeless populations and led many young Vietnamese women down the path of prostitution.<sup>4</sup> Through increased engagement with these prostitutes, often without using contraception, members of the military greatly contributed to the number of unplanned pregnancies and, ultimately, the creation of a large population of Amerasian children. Many of these children, whether born out of prostitution or other situations, were abandoned by their American fathers and, often, their mothers as a direct social consequence and out of their own need to survive.

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<sup>4</sup> Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 17, [http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_Cover](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover).

Collectively, these actions culminated in a negative situation for the Vietnamese created by Americans who would later play the role of savior. These situations also put the savior complex in clearer perspective as it manifested in the United States itself. Those seeking to aid the Vietnamese, even with the best of intentions, failed to understand their role, and that of their nation, as a root cause of the suffering and war they tried to alleviate. Yet this was not understood at the time. As a result, white saviors continued to do what they believed was best for the Vietnamese, eventually leading Americans to adopt Vietnamese children, rather than enable the Vietnamese to take agency and allow them to tell their would-be white saviors how to best help them. This Western sense of knowing what is best for non-white cultures was at the core of America's involvement in Vietnam and Operation Babylift.

### **Last Years of the Vietnam War**

In early 1975, North Vietnamese leadership concluded that, despite former U.S. President Richard Nixon's earlier promises of retaliation should South Vietnam be attacked, the U.S. was now unlikely to intervene.<sup>5</sup> This was a conclusion that would quickly and greatly impact the lives of all South Vietnamese, including many of their most vulnerable children. Under Nixon, North Vietnam had been relentlessly bombed, including heavily populated civilian areas like the capital city of Hanoi. According to historian Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, "By the fall of 1972, the Nixon administration had dropped more than 155,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam."<sup>6</sup> Nixon also ordered the bombing campaign Operation Linebacker II to commence from December 18th to the 29th. Known as the "Christmas bombings" or, in Hanoi, the "twelve days of darkness," the

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Weller Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 613.

<sup>6</sup> Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 375.

campaign saw the U.S. carpet-bomb the Hanoi-Hai Phong area with 3,420 sorties, “inflicting severe physical and psychological damage on North Vietnam.”<sup>7</sup> Schools, neighborhoods, and hospitals were wiped out, setting off a migration of displaced Vietnamese looking for refuge in the South.<sup>8</sup>

The North Vietnamese had come to see Nixon as a mad man, an understanding that eventually helped bring them to peace negotiations with the U.S. This was entirely by design. As Nixon once shared, “I call it the Madman Theory [...]. I want the North Vietnamese to believe that I’ve reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We’ll just slip the word to them that, ‘for God’s sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communists. We can’t restrain him when he’s angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button’—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.”<sup>9</sup> However, by 1974, any fear the North Vietnamese government had of Nixon or renewed U.S. military involvement dwindled after his resignation as a result of the Watergate scandal. By 1975, they were sure Nixon’s predecessor, President Gerald R. Ford, would not reenter the war. After fighting the French for independence from 1945 to 1954 and then the United States starting in 1955, the path to victory and reunification of the Fatherland finally began to appear for North Vietnam.

In 1975, the North was further emboldened to pursue an offensive and reunify Vietnam when the U.S. evacuated neighboring Cambodia as it fell to the communist Khmer Rouge. In

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<sup>7</sup> Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 295.

<sup>8</sup> Allison Varzally, *Children of Reunion: Vietnamese Adoptions and the Politics of Family Migrations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 50, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1462777&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 582.

March, the North Vietnamese military began rapidly taking over South Vietnamese provinces. As the North Vietnamese military moved south, so too did masses of South Vietnamese refugees heading for port cities and, eventually, Saigon. According to historian Stanley Karnow, "... Terrified citizens jammed the airports, the docks, and the beaches, attempting to flee. Thousands waded into the sea, among them mothers clutching babies; many drowned or were trampled to death as they fought to reach barges and fishing boats; sometimes South Vietnamese soldiers shot civilians to make room for themselves."<sup>10</sup> It was during this time that World Airways president Ed Daly attempted to rescue civilians from Da Nang. The rapid displacement of Vietnamese and the surge of refugees flooding toward Saigon resulted in more children being taken in by the city's 134 orphanages.<sup>11</sup> By early 1975, these facilities were already caring for approximately 20,000 children.<sup>12</sup> The South Vietnamese exodus was largely motivated by the bloodbath theory, a concept that would come to greatly influence the fate of the nation's children through Operation Babylift.

### **The Bloodbath Theory**

In late March 1975, the Hanoi government exacerbated fears related to the bloodbath theory by commencing the Ho Chi Minh Campaign, which called for the capture of Saigon by May 1.<sup>13</sup> The bloodbath theory held that upon victory, the North Vietnamese would slaughter their southern counterparts. According to Cherie Clark, an American who lived in Saigon and ran the orphanage Friends of the Children of Viet Nam (FCVN) during Operation Babylift, the

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 666.

<sup>11</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>12</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>13</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 665.

theory stemmed from past bloodshed at the hands of the communists, specifically the Tet Offensive Massacre at Hue in 1968.<sup>14</sup> “The example was Hue. During the Tet offensive when [the U.S. and South Vietnamese militaries] went in after the fighting... [nuns] had been killed, thousands had died. That is where the ‘theory’ came from,” she shares.<sup>15</sup> After occupying Hue for four weeks, the Communists retreated and, as they did, “assassinated thousands of [Republic of Vietnam] (RVN) officials and supporters, [in] possibly the largest atrocity of the war.”<sup>16</sup> As the North Vietnamese progressively made their way to Saigon in 1975, those with the most to fear were South Vietnamese who were affiliated with the United States, be it through the military, business, education, or personal relations. This included those who worked in foreign-run orphanages and Amerasian children, orphaned or not.

The bloodbath theory gained global attention. It was born out of genuine fear for the South Vietnamese and, arguably, as a result of government propaganda and fear mongering in order to get more U.S. Congressional military aid for South Vietnam. The theory originated under the Nixon administration as a means of justifying continued war in Vietnam in order to save the Vietnamese from themselves. It was compounded by the Massacre at Hue and seemingly further validated by the beginnings of the Cambodian Genocide in 1975 at the hands of the victorious Khmer Rouge. At a press conference on March 6, 1975, President Ford signaled that the theory lived on in his administration. He argued that, “The record shows in both Vietnam and in Cambodia that Communist takeover of an area does not bring an end to violence, but on

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<sup>14</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Cherie Clark, interview.

<sup>16</sup> Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 444.



the contrary subjects the innocent to new horrors.”<sup>17</sup> Other political figures also advocated for the theory. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, who favored re-entering the war with a bombing campaign in the event of a North Vietnamese offensive, testified before the U.S. Senate that, if the Communists conquered South Vietnam, “over 200,000 Vietnamese would face death.”<sup>18</sup> Americans began paying attention to the situation in Vietnam more closely again, perhaps for the first time since the American prisoners of war came home from North Vietnam in 1973. Now their concern lay in the fate of Vietnam’s children at the hands of the Communists.

Many Americans, both in Vietnam and the United States, strongly believed that the Communists would undoubtedly dispatch any children that looked like their Western enemy.<sup>19</sup> Sachs described the rumors swirling around South Vietnam that the “Communists hated the con lai [Amerasians] and they would kill these children when they took over the country. They wouldn't do it simply, either. They would slit open the belly of a con lai, pull out the liver, and eat it.”<sup>20</sup> For those children in the orphanages who were not Amerasian, death was also feared by means of neglect or abandonment.<sup>21</sup>

### **America’s Role in Creating South Vietnamese Orphans and Refugees**

As Americans came to endorse the idea of saving the children of Vietnam, the mood of the nation began to change. Saving these young, innocent lives quickly became a way for the

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<sup>17</sup> Gerald R. Ford, “Press Conference No. 10 by President Gerald R. Ford,” *The Old Executive Office Building, Washington, D.C.*, March 6, 1975, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0248/whpr19750306-010.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Gloria Emerson, *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from the Vietnam War* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 107.

<sup>19</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>20</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>21</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

United States to feel it was potentially atoning for its sins in Southeast Asia. For many Americans who were soon holding their newly adopted child for the first time, atonement may never have been so rewarding. As the arrival of the children to the U.S. took up residence in the forefront of the American mind, the darker aspects of U.S. involvement in Vietnam—including situations that turned these very children into orphans and refugees—seemingly dissipated from memory. As Gloria Emerson observed during Operation Babylift, “It is almost forgotten during these excited, evangelical scenes at airports that it is this country that made so many Vietnamese into orphans, that destroyed villages ripping families apart, this country that sent young Vietnamese fathers to their deaths.”<sup>22</sup> From war crimes and atrocities to fathering Amerasian children with Vietnamese women and abandoning them, Americans did not just try to help save Vietnamese orphans, they played a key role in creating them.

Unlike other wars, the conflict in Vietnam was one with no battlefronts and safe zones. In South Vietnam, the Viet Cong and communist sympathizers were well hidden among the general population. As a result, members of the military were constantly on guard and saw every Vietnamese as a potential enemy. “You never knew who was the enemy and who was the friend. They all looked alike. They all dressed alike. They were all Vietnamese. Some of them were [Viet Cong],” recalled former Marine captain E.J. Banks.<sup>23</sup> Stanley Karnow noted that many Americans in Vietnam saw themselves as saviors, but that “they were also chronically apprehensive and rightfully suspect that any Vietnamese might be hostile. They were told that

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<sup>22</sup> Gloria Emerson, “Collecting Souvenirs: Operation Babylift,” *New Republic* 172, no 17 (1975): 8, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=9984352&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>23</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 467.

some areas belonged to the [Viet Cong] and others to the Saigon regime, but they never trusted such flimsy intelligence..." Years into the war, soldiers continued to struggle in deciphering their enemy from those they were supposed to protect.

In 1965, the U.S. Marines began conducting "cordon-and-search" missions as part of an effort to ferret out Viet Cong hiding among the population in parts of South Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> The Marines were, theoretically, "supposed to surround a group of hamlets, then distribute food and dispense medical care to the inhabitants while probing for [Viet Cong] cadres." According to former Marine William Ehrhart, soldiers conducted these missions in more invasive ways:

We would go through a village before dawn, rousting everybody out of bed, and kicking down doors and dragging them out if they didn't move fast enough. They all had underground bunkers inside their huts to protect themselves against bombing and shelling. But to us the bunkers were [Viet Cong] hiding places, and we'd blow them up with dynamite—and blow up the huts too. If we spotted extra rice lying around, we'd confiscated it to keep them from giving it to the [Viet Cong]. [The peasants were] herded like cattle into a barbed wire compound, and left to sit there in the hot sun for the rest of the day, with no shade. At the end of the day, the villagers would be turned loose. Their homes had been wrecked, their chickens killed, their rice confiscated—and if they weren't pro-[Viet Cong] before we got there, they sure as hell were by the time we left.<sup>25</sup>

Though many Americans cared for the Vietnamese and their wellbeing as much as they cared about stemming the flow of communism through Southeast Asia, the U.S. military continued to cause them great harm. By 1969, over 70 percent of the villages in the coastal Quang Ngai province had "been shelled by Navy ships, bombed, bulldozed, or burned to the ground, and more than 40 percent of its people had been forced into refugee camps."<sup>26</sup> Areas of South Vietnam were designated by the U.S. as "free-fire zones" and many soldiers lived by the phrase

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<sup>24</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 468.

<sup>25</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 467-468.

<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2017), 431.

“kill anything that moves.”<sup>27</sup> As a result, 300,000 Vietnamese were killed by U.S. troops between 1965 and 1968 according to one U.S. Senate study.<sup>28</sup> U.S. and RVN forces are credited with causing 475,000 civilians deaths as a result of “starvation, exposure, execution, massacre, bombing, shelling, or murder” between 1965 and 1972.<sup>29</sup>

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It became clear, particularly during 1968, the “bloodiest year of U.S. involvement,” that for many American servicemen, the South Vietnamese were expendable in the fight against communism.<sup>30</sup> For some, there was a darker lack of concern for the locals that would manifest in horrifying ways that created refugees and orphans out of those who survived. On March 16, 1968, one hundred five U.S. Army soldiers entered the hamlet of My Lai, and over the course of four hours, systematically murdered between four and five hundred “defenseless old men, women, children, and infants. Many of the women and girls were raped or sodomized before they were shot. Eighteen of the dead were pregnant. Fifty of them were three years old or younger.”<sup>31</sup> <sup>32</sup> According to A. J. Langguth, U.S. troops were also “raping and murdering” through nearby Binh Tay.<sup>33</sup> There, a soldier named Gary Roschevitz “lined up seven women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five and ordered them to strip. He intended to rape them

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<sup>27</sup> Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 445.

<sup>28</sup> Kiernan, *Việt Nam*, 445.

<sup>29</sup> Kiernan, *Việt Nam*, 445.

<sup>30</sup> Kiernan, *Việt Nam*, 444.

<sup>31</sup> Kiernan, *Việt Nam*, 444.

<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2017), 432.

<sup>33</sup> A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954–1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 501.

all. But the first woman became hysterical, the others screamed and Roschevitz opened fire on their naked bodies with his M79 grenade launcher.’’<sup>34</sup>

The previous day, the soldiers had been told that as many as two hundred Viet Cong were waiting for them in the hamlet.<sup>35</sup> Upon landing their helicopters, the soldiers were not met with enemy fire and there were no enemy soldiers present.<sup>36</sup> Even so, they followed their Commander’s orders to “go in rapidly and [...] neutralize everything. To kill everything,” even women and children.<sup>37</sup> With an Army photographer present and even stopping to take a lunch break part way through, almost all of the soldiers did as they were ordered to do the night before.<sup>38</sup> Though the My Lai Massacre was unique in its breadth of devastation, it was hardly an anomaly and other U.S. anti-civilian episodes occurred on smaller scales both before and after.<sup>39</sup>

Another glaring instance of American intervention that would feed into the growing number of Vietnamese refugees and orphans was Operation Speedy Express. Conducted between December 1968 and May 1969, the military mission covered three South Vietnamese provinces in the Mekong delta region and resulted in over 10,000 deaths, all claimed to be enemy forces.<sup>40</sup> It was later determined that at least 5,000 were civilians.<sup>41</sup> According to the 9th Infantry Division Commander, “[Viet Cong] units disbursed and blended very effectively with people in the

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<sup>34</sup> A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954–1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 501.

<sup>35</sup> Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2017), 431.

<sup>36</sup> Ward and Burns, *Vietnam War*, 431.

<sup>37</sup> Ward and Burns, *Vietnam War*, 432.

<sup>38</sup> Ward and Burns, *Vietnam War*, 432–33.

<sup>39</sup> Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 444.

<sup>40</sup> Kiernan, *Việt Nam*, 445.

<sup>41</sup> Kiernan, *Việt Nam*, 445.

numerous villages and hamlets, greatly complicating reconnaissance difficulties and problems of fire control.”<sup>42</sup> Even without the intent that was behind the My Lai Massacre, American troops continued to inflict civilian casualties. Beyond these horrors of war that orphaned South Vietnamese many children, Amerasians children also faced abandonment by their American fathers and, often, their mothers as well.

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The Amerasian children born to Vietnamese mothers and American military fathers during the Vietnam War were hardly the first to arise out of U.S. military intervention in Asia. Though most commonly associated with the Vietnam War, Amerasian children were born in the Philippines after the United States annexed it, in China and Japan during World War II, and in Korea during the Korean War. According to Ayako Sahara, “The children who were called ‘Amerasian’—children of American service men and Asian mothers—were common products of not only U.S. bases in Asia but also of the history of U.S. colonialism, occupation, and wars in Asia (famously the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Thailand).”<sup>43</sup> The term “Amerasian” itself originated from author and activist Pearl S. Buck in her 1930 book, *East Wind, West Wind*. In response to the growing number of Amerasian children resulting from war, Buck founded the first adoption organization focused on biracial children, Welcome House (later, the Pearl S. Buck

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<sup>42</sup> Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 445.

<sup>43</sup> Ayako Sahara, “Theater of Rescue: Cultural Representations of U.S. Evacuation from Vietnam,” *Journal of American & Canadian Studies*, no. 30 (2012): 63, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=87764333&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Foundation), in 1949.<sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup> “I am compelled to the conclusion that the most needy children in the world are those born in Asia whose mothers are Asian but whose fathers are American,” Buck stated. “They are a new group of human beings, a group that Asians do not know how to deal with, illegitimate as well as mixed in race. Our present project, therefore, is the Amerasian.”<sup>46</sup> This trend continued in Vietnam. There, U.S. soldiers created and abandoned the very children that Americans, as white saviors, would later seek to evacuate through Operation Babylift.

Whether an Amerasian child was born in the Philippines under American colonization or during the wars in Korea or Vietnam, there was at least one commonality among them: the absence of American fathers.<sup>47</sup> “While a few Americans took long-term responsibility for their children, most did not, leaving mother and child to fend for themselves,” notes Robert S. McKelvey.<sup>48</sup> The children were often conceived through U.S. military men engaging with Vietnamese prostitutes or having affairs with local women, behaviors that the U.S. military tried to control rather than collectively end. When the soldiers returned home to the U.S. or moved to another part of Vietnam, they left their romantic entanglements and their children behind, often unsupported and alone in a culture that would no longer accept them. “Growing up fatherless in a society like Vietnam’s, where status, income, and opportunity derive from the father, Amerasians

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<sup>44</sup> *Pearl S. Buck’s Biography*, Pearl S. Buck International, accessed January 17, 2019, <https://pearlsbuck.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2018-1-Jan-Biography.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> Sue-Je Lee Gage, “The Amerasian Problem: Blood, Duty, and Race,” *International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2007): 89, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=24305369&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>46</sup> Sue-Je Lee Gage, “The Amerasian Problem: Blood, Duty, and Race,” *International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2007): 89, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=24305369&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>47</sup> Robert S. McKelvey, *The Dust of Life: America’s Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 102.

<sup>48</sup> McKelvey, *The Dust of Life*, 102.

faced almost insurmountable difficulties.”<sup>49</sup> Yet the actions leading to the plight of the Amerasians that the American public would become so infatuated with in the mid-70s did not stem simply from unchecked sexual relations. Rather, it was another unforeseen result of the aforementioned anti-civilian actions conducted by many U.S. service men throughout South Vietnam.

As war raged on in the Vietnamese countryside, many civilians sought safety in South Vietnam’s cities. According to author Trin Yarborough, “Vietnamese were driven by war in the countryside into the cities, where some found jobs working for the Americans as cooks, servants, and clerks, and others became destitute and homeless. Some Vietnamese women, many in their teens, often became prostitutes because there was no other way for them to earn a living.”<sup>50</sup> Many of America’s young soldiers sought female companionship for various reasons, but most appeared to be driven by carnal desire. “I think most of the young soldiers were looking for a relationship,” one Vietnamese woman recalls, “but when they had one, they still went fooling around, because there were so many, many women out there.” The increasing demand for prostitutes was often met by recruiting poor female refugees driven out of their homes by the war. “Brothel madams would go to bus stations and other sites where refugees gathered to offer newly arrived country girls food and shelter in exchange for work as brothel maids,” says Yarborough. “Most eventually ‘graduated’ to prostitution, sometimes because they were not allowed to leave.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> McKelvey, *The Dust of Life*, 102.

<sup>50</sup> Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 17,  
[http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_Cover](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover).

<sup>51</sup> Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 17.



Unable to stop their men from consorting with local prostitutes, U.S. military officials focused their energies on trying to control their interactions. This was not because of the growing number of Amerasian births and abandonment resulting in homeless and starving children, which “the American government, American military, American media, American aid workers, and American soldiers themselves were well aware of ...”<sup>52</sup> Rather, it had to do with keeping the troops healthy. After it was discovered that one-third of the servicemen stationed at a U.S. base in the Central Highlands had contracted venereal diseases, the military sought to organize and control prostitution.<sup>53</sup> Near the military base, a twenty-five-acre compound was created, “patrolled by military police and enclosing forty concrete whorehouses behind barbed wire.” Called “Disneyland East,” soldiers could get a quickie for between \$2.50 and \$5.<sup>54</sup> The prostitutes, required to carry “entertainer cards,” were regularly provided with medical checkups to keep the troops from contracting diseases.<sup>55</sup> As Yarborough points out, this system was modeled after a previous setup the U.S. military had used in the Philippines, “which had produced thousands of fatherless half-American, half-Filipino children, most also left abandoned and destitute.”<sup>56</sup> While the U.S. military did not entirely turn its back on the abandoned Amerasian children, it did little more than occasionally supply them and their mothers with medical care or food.<sup>57</sup> The children, though half-American and therefore entitled to American

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<sup>52</sup> Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 20,  
[http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_Cover](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover).

<sup>53</sup> Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 18.

<sup>54</sup> Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 20.

<sup>57</sup> Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 20.

citizenship and rights, were not seen as such. They also often faced rejection from their mothers, out of a need for survival, and Vietnamese culture as a whole, which had no place for mixed-race, illegitimate children.

Prostitution helped women survive to an extent, but unexpected pregnancies were common, forcing them to choose between raising an illegitimate child or being able to work and support themselves. Many of these births were due to the lack of Vietnamese awareness of contraception or access to it. That problem was compounded by most American men refusing to wear condoms while engaging with prostitutes.<sup>58</sup> Often, the children born of these liaisons needed to be hidden or given away or else the mother would no longer be able to find work.<sup>59</sup> This act of survival would later be put under scrutiny by Western saviors seeking to validate their efforts through painting the Vietnamese as unfit and unwilling to care for their children. Meanwhile, the American fathers, if they even knew about the pregnancies, simply did not have to look back.

Prostitution was far from the only way Amerasian children were conceived. Some were the result of rape while others came from formal relationships.<sup>60</sup> Others, like Quyen, were the product of extramarital affairs. “My mother worked in a canteen at an American base where my father was a helicopter pilot,” Quyen shares. “He flew the helicopters with red crosses that rescue the wounded. He was married at the time, but my mother didn't know that. She was about three months pregnant with me when he was transferred to another American base. She never

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<sup>58</sup> Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 19, [http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_Cover](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover).

<sup>59</sup> Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 19.

heard from him again.”<sup>61</sup> Oanh, an Amerasian woman living in the U.S., shared the story of her origins in an interview with Robert S. McKelvey:

According to her foster grandmother, Oanh's mother came from a very poor family in the region and took a job at a nearby American base to help make ends meet. There she met Oanh's father, fell in love, and became pregnant with Oanh. When her family learned of the pregnancy, they cast her out and cut off all contact. The American soldier helped support her, but had to return home before Oanh's birth. For reasons that are unclear to Oanh, her father was unable to take her mother home with him. After his departure, Oanh's mother received one letter from him, then never heard from him again. Overwhelmed by the loss of her family and her American lover, and faced with the prospect of raising a child alone, Oanh's mother became very depressed.<sup>62</sup>

Once Oanh was born, her mother left her with an acquaintance who would become her foster grandmother. She never said where she was going and never returned.<sup>63</sup> Vietnamese culture maintained strong rules about premarital relations and childbirth, particularly in regard to foreigners. Many unwed mothers were faced with either having to give up their children for adoption or face familial and social rejection, thereby possibly inhibiting their ability to keep even themselves fed and employed.<sup>64</sup>

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By 1970, the American public was becoming increasingly aware of the situation involving Amerasian children, knowledge that was further spread by a news report citing the existence of as many as 100,000, mostly abandoned, children.<sup>65</sup> In response to the situation, the

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<sup>61</sup> Robert S. McKelvey, *The Dust of Life: America's Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 106.

<sup>62</sup> Robert S. McKelvey, *The Dust of Life: America's Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 22.

<sup>63</sup> McKelvey, *The Dust of Life*, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 19,  
[http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_Cover](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover).

<sup>65</sup> Yarborough, *Surviving Twice*, 20.

U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) released a statement that read: “The care and welfare of these unfortunate children... has never been and is not now considered an area of government responsibility, nor an appropriate mission for the DOD to assume.”<sup>66</sup> While the U.S. government would not attempt to assist these children until Operation Babylift five years later, the American public began taking somewhat of an interest in them. Some had already begun adopting children out of Vietnam with the assistance of orphanages like Friends for All Children (FFAC) and the aforementioned FCVN. Rosemary Taylor and her staff at FFAC arranged 1,132 adoption placements between 1968 and 1972.<sup>67</sup> As a whole, the nation continued to move away from all things Vietnam, a movement that was reinforced by the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the return of American POWS in 1973. Two years later, however, Americans would find their way back into Vietnam again, doing what they felt was best—and what rewarded them most.

### **Americans Decide to Save Vietnam’s Children**

During the months leading up to the capitulation of Saigon, America’s obsession with the situation involving the Amerasians intensified.<sup>68</sup> According to Sachs, despite the humanitarian crisis engulfing the whole of South Vietnam, Americans remained focused on the thousands of children in foreign-run orphanages. “Americans,” she writes “were watching the news on television and calling their representatives in Washington to demand that the U.S. government do

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<sup>66</sup> Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 20, [http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_Cover](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover).

<sup>67</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 71.

<sup>68</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

something about the plight of this particular group of children in Vietnam.”<sup>69</sup> In discussing the magnitude of the nation’s response in April 1975, Massachusetts Institute of Technology political scientist Dr. Lucian Pye stated, “What strikes me is this amazing psychological phenomenon, this outburst. We're trying to prove that we are not really abandoning these people. The guilt feeling is very deep, cutting across hawk and dove alike.”<sup>70</sup> Many Americans did not just want to help these children, they felt a personal and moral obligation.

In light of the impending North Vietnamese victory and the presumed slaughter, foreign-run orphanages in South Vietnam began sorting out ways to evacuate their Amerasian charges and any other children who were already in the process of being adopted. These efforts, in conjunction with those by other private citizens like Ed Daley, who conducted his own evacuation of a small group of children from FCVN using one of his World Airways planes, caught the attention of the U.S. government.<sup>71</sup> On April 3, 1975, President Ford announced the beginning of Operation Babylift, an initiative to airlift several thousand children out of Vietnam and place them with adoptive families. The Ford administration authorized \$2 million and thirty flights to evacuate children from South Vietnam.<sup>72</sup> Between 2,000 and 3,000 of the country’s estimated 879,000 orphans, including children who had parents but were separated from them,

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<sup>69</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Flaste, “Controversy Is Growing,” *New York Times*. April 09, 1975, accessed December 01, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/09/archives/controversy-is-growing-airlift-of-vietnamese-children-evokes.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 134.

<sup>72</sup> Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist, “Operation Babylift or Babyabduction: Implications of the Hague Convention of the Humanitarian Evacuation and Rescue of Children,” *International Social Work* 52, no. 5 (2009): 662, doi:10.1177/0020872809337677.

were evacuated.<sup>73</sup> Of those taken, between 250 and 1,500 were estimated to have never officially been abandoned and only about 20 percent were “racially mixed,” despite Amerasian children being at the center of the argument for the evacuation.<sup>74 75</sup>

Just as Operation Babylift itself meets the criteria for the white savior complex, so does the Vietnam War collectively. The war demonstrated the same fundamental thoughts, beliefs, and privilege on the part of the U.S. that created the need for actions like Operation Babylift. An interaction between American and North Vietnamese women at a 1969 anti-war event in Canada demonstrated this. At the event, three female Viet Cong representatives described the situation in Vietnam to an American group that included Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz. Ortiz recalls that the Vietnamese women explained “in considerable detail the military situation in South Vietnam: U.S. massive expulsion of people from the countryside into refugee camps, with a ‘kill everything that moves’ program in effect. They told us of their commitment and determination to drive the U.S. invaders out and thanked us for our solidarity and efforts to end the war.”<sup>76</sup> When asked by one American woman wielding a checkbook how to contribute money to the Viet Cong cause to end the war, the other American women also showed interest in donating. One of the Vietnamese representatives replied, “We do not want your money, we do not need your money. We need you to love your own sons who are fighting and dying there and bring them home.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>74</sup> Tracy Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphans,” *New York Times*, May 09, 1976, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/09/archives/torment-over-the-viet-nonorphans-nonorphans.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>76</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

<sup>77</sup> Flaherty, *No More Heroes*, Kindle Edition.

Ortiz notes that “there was considerable confusion among the U.S. American women present, both young and old, a sort of desperate begging to provide material aid.”<sup>78</sup> In hindsight, for Ortiz, this was when she first understood the savior mentality.<sup>79</sup>

The situation Ortiz witnessed reflects an aspect of the white savior complex that many struggle with, and not just the women at the conference. As Cole describes using more recent events, “The White Savior Industrial Complex is a valve for releasing the unbearable pressures that build in a system built on pillage. We can participate in the economic destruction of Haiti over long years, but when the earthquake strikes it feels good to send \$10 each to the rescue fund.”<sup>80</sup> As with the American women offering donations to the Viet Cong, and later, taking part in the adoption of Vietnamese children en masse, there was a feel-good, heroic element that allowed white saviors to overlook America’s negative actions and impacts in Vietnam, no matter how directly it linked the savior to the problem.

The Department of Defense’s aforementioned response to the Amerasian crisis, along with the overall actions of the U.S. during its time in Vietnam, largely fit within the framework of the white savior complex. In particular, the actions of the DOD and its response fully demonstrate the argument that “the white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.”<sup>81</sup> The DOD’s statement on having no responsibility for the Amerasians exemplifies just one of many policies and actions

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<sup>78</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

<sup>79</sup> Flaherty, *No More Heroes*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>80</sup> Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

<sup>81</sup> Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex.”

that benefited the U.S., yet had serious, long-term repercussions for the Vietnamese. Other examples include the aforementioned policies on “free fire” zones and prostitution. As a result, Americans and other white Westerners founded charities, or in this case, orphanages in Vietnam, and donated to charities—actions that felt like good deeds despite the U.S. itself being at the center of the very problems they were trying to fix. Finally, with Operation Babylift, the U.S. awarded itself orphans from Vietnam, most of whom were not even Amerasian.



## Chapter 2: West Knows Best

For many Americans, evacuating the children of South Vietnam before the communist takeover was seen as a moral obligation. In large part, this stemmed from the devastation of the war that many Americans acknowledged. President Ford, the fifth and final United States president to oversee American military involvement in Vietnam, was also a strong proponent of helping South Vietnam, and later, Operation Babylift. This was partly due to his concern over the Amerasians and what he saw as the United States' responsibility to them and the South Vietnamese. In his 1979 autobiography, Ford wrote, "Everyone suffers in a war, but no one suffers more than the children, and the airlift was the least that we could do."<sup>1</sup> Louis Wiesner of the State Department also expressed support for the operation, stating, "Fortunately, some concerned and courageous Americans, headed by President Ford, were prepared to assume responsibility for rescuing those to whom we owed a moral obligation."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, many in the United States felt that the nation could do at least this for the children of Vietnam. It soon became evident, however, that meeting this obligation benefitted Americans more than it did the Vietnamese.

The larger consequences of the impending fall of South Vietnam faded to the background for many Americans who instead focused solely on the children's situation. Saving them from their current existence and a future under communist reign became a problem that had to be solved by a nation that had previously not been bothered by the state of any of the South

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 252.

<sup>2</sup> Louis A. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors: Displaced Persons and Other War Victims in Vietnam, 1954–1975* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 365.

Vietnamese. Americans, anxious to get involved with Operation Babylift, had no ill intent, yet it would become clear that their willingness to help was somewhat subconsciously conditional upon being saviors in the way they preferred.

White Westerners felt they knew what was best for the Vietnamese and acted without understanding the culture they were adamant to save. For many, especially middle-class white Americans, this was their chance to save a life and atone for their nation's sins in Vietnam. Yet the "why" and the "how" of saving these children was not informed by a genuine understanding of their need and how the children had gotten to this point in their lives. Furthermore, the inherent privilege of white Westerners demanded an emotional experience in exchange for helping these children. The impulse to save others in this conditional manner stems from a long history of Western racial and cultural imperialism and the need for white people to have their privilege and roles as saviors validated. Rather than addressing the root issues, which they may be responsible for in many ways, the saviors seek out a solution that emotionally satisfies them, whether it be the adoption of a child, or public praise for their efforts and struggles. Perhaps no individual better demonstrated the white savior complex at work during Operation Babylift than World Airways president and chairman, millionaire Ed Daly.

### **"High-Flying" Ed Daly: A Model White Savior**

Ed Daly was no stranger to the spotlight by the time he made headlines with his unsanctioned efforts to evacuate refugees in Vietnam. In early April 1975, he won the hearts of Americans by defying U.S. government orders and loading one of his planes with Vietnamese children from FCVN after making arrangements with Cherie Clark. The unauthorized flight would become the first to bring Vietnamese children to the U.S. just prior to the official start of

the government's Operation Babylift program. Daly has gone down in history as an American hero, yet his relationship with Vietnam prior to his evacuation efforts, and his behaviors and motives during said efforts, paint a different picture—one that illustrates Daly's role as a white savior.

Before attempting to save the victims of war in Vietnam, Daly had been profiting from the very conflict they suffered from. World Airways was a cargo and passenger airline that Daly had bought in 1950. Under his management, the airline became quite successful and was frequently contracted by the U.S. military.<sup>3</sup> During the early years of the Vietnam War, Daly "had made millions from the U.S. government by ferrying military supplies and troops into and around Southeast Asia."<sup>4</sup> In March 1975, the military approached Daly with a new opportunity: evacuating refugees. As the situation worsened in Da Nang that month, the military proposed a contract in which Daly would take twenty planeloads of refugees out of city.<sup>5</sup> However, the U.S. soon retracted the offer, citing safety issues with Daly's planes.

Despite losing the government contract, Daly decided to start evacuation flights of his own on March 29. "The situation became critical, and apparently, Daly went back to Da Nang and tried to rescue as many women and children as possible," writes Cherie Clark. "Unfortunately, the planes were stormed [...]. Pictures were shown of men hanging on the landing gear and falling to their deaths as the planes took off. A full media crew was on board, so the flight was well documented and controversial."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the risky and ill-planned effort to

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<sup>3</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 129.

save Vietnamese women and children did not play out as Daly had hoped. Still, he came out as a hero in the eyes of many Americans who saw his well-publicized endeavor. A June 1975 article of *People* featuring Daly's adventures emphasized his role as a selfless hero:

... Da Nang Airport was surrounded by [Viet Cong], and 1,000 South Vietnamese men, women, children and soldiers were desperate to board the last aircraft to sanctuary in Saigon. With a .38 revolver in his hand and a measure of booze under his belt, Daly [...] pushed his boot into the face of a soldier who had just elbowed an old woman off the ramp of the taxiing jet. Then he laid out another soldier with a right cross. The World Airways plane, overloaded and damaged by a grenade, limped back to Saigon. For his effort to perform an act of humanity, Ed Daly received (besides a bruised kidney, loosened teeth and a chewed-up and bleeding forearm) reprimands from AID and the U.S. embassy, who had ordered him not to fly to Da Nang. But Ed Daly does not listen well to what he does not want to hear. After two days of roistering R&R, he alerted his crew that it was time to move out some orphans.<sup>7</sup>

Future World Airways' literature would claim that "Daly, on his own, flew [World Airways] 727s to Da Nang to rescue women and children.... The 'Last Flight From Da Nang' garnered worldwide media attention as Daly and World crew fought off thousands of would be passengers seeking refuge on the aircraft, dodged bullets and grenades, and ultimately carried more than 300 people to safety in Saigon."<sup>8</sup> The final number of passengers that were actually women and children was just eleven.<sup>9</sup> Despite the realities of how the evacuation truly transpired, Daly maintained his self-appointed status as a savior. Upon landing in Saigon, he began making plans to evacuate orphans.

As Daly began looking for children to take to the U.S., Rosemary Taylor and Cherie Clark were working on ways to get their orphans who were in the process of being adopted to the

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<sup>7</sup> Harry Minetree, "Heroes of the Vietnam Orphan Lift: High-Flying Ed Daly and His World Airlines," *People*, June 16, 1975, 1, <https://people.com/archive/heroes-of-the-vietnam-orphan-lift-high-flying-ed-daly-and-his-world-airlines-vol-3-no-23/>.

<sup>8</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>9</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

U.S. faster. Upon hearing of Daly's endeavors in Da Nang, FFAC reached out to him to see if he would help evacuate their children. Wende Grant, who worked at the FFAC base in Denver, Colorado, often visited Vietnam, and it was she who met with Daly in Saigon.<sup>10</sup> She requested he help evacuate six hundred children, which he agreed to by way of a 747, the world's largest passenger jumbo jet.<sup>11</sup> Not twenty-four hours after striking the deal, its terms began to shift as Daly changed the number of planes, their sizes, and destinations repeatedly over three days.<sup>12</sup> Finally, he settled on offering a DC-8 cargo plane, which he wanted filled with "600 children—not one less—who were to be boarded in half-an-hour for the most dramatic, action-packed television coverage."<sup>13</sup> Wende, who knew right away they could not meet this requirement due to lack of time and staffing, declined his offer.<sup>14</sup> She may also have been persuaded by the U.S. government to decline the offer, given their recent issues with Daly over his actions in Da Nang. They did not want him involved in any more evacuations.<sup>15 16</sup>

Cherie Clark, still trying to secure passage for the children of FCVN, clearly recalls the moment she learned that she might have an opportunity with Ed Daly. "[A] nurse told me that at the last moment Rosemary [Taylor] had refused Ed Daly's offer of transportation. Immediately our spirits picked up. If Rosemary didn't want to take advantage of Daly's offer of a free flight to

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<sup>10</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>11</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>12</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 155.

<sup>13</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 155.

<sup>15</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>16</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 130.

freedom for the children, then we would.”<sup>17</sup> Clark sought Daly out at Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut airport to see if he would be interested in helping. Once he was assured that she was not affiliated with FFAC, he agreed to take two hundred children who would need to be ready in two hours. Clark declined due to time constraints, not unlike Wende Grant before her. Later that evening, however, World Airways staff approached Clark and said they would take the children if they could be ready in an hour. Clark and some of her staff arrived at the airport with between fifty and sixty children.<sup>18 19</sup>

Regarding Daly’s sudden willingness to transport Clark’s small number of children, Sachs speculates that, “[his] pride must have been at stake at that moment. He had the night before boasted to the international press that he would take up to fifteen hundred children out of Vietnam on two separate jets. Now, with [FFAC’s] withdrawal of [its] kids, the greatest danger Daly faced might have been acute embarrassment. In that light, Cherie Clark’s arrival presented a new option.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Daly undoubtedly cared about the people of Vietnam on some level, but his desire to save them was completely contingent upon the emotional experience of receiving attention and praise. This was clear to Clark as she approached him with the children:

At the airport, we were waved through the security checkpoints by saluting soldiers, without even pausing to show any identification. The convoy lurched to a halt at the side of a small, well-lit building. Ed Daly rushed out and suddenly the darkness was split by flash bulbs. Reporters appeared, jostling each other and shouting questions, mobbing us—surely they didn’t expect us to be interviewed now? Ed Daly seemed to thrive on the attention. He was larger than life, and his magnetism drew the reporters around him. He

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<sup>17</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman’s Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 134.

<sup>18</sup> Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy*, 130.

<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 156.

<sup>20</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

took charge, climbing on the running board of the lead jeep and shouting for us to head out to his plane.<sup>21</sup>

For Clark, Daly's motives made little difference— she just needed him to help her save the children, no matter how risky it might be. The children boarded the plane. A report of a possible North Vietnamese attack on the airport led to the runway lights being shut off, and Daly was denied authorization to take flight. He and his pilot took the risk, making what the *San Francisco Chronicle* deemed “a daring ascent from Saigon airport.”<sup>22</sup> The flight arrived safely in the U.S. with the first load of Vietnamese refugee children.

During his evacuation efforts, Daly spoke out against the U.S. government, daring the authorities to stop him and expressing his disappointment in America's abandonment of Vietnam. “I'm not a hero,” he once said of his efforts in Vietnam. “I'm a catalyst. None of those bureaucratic bums in Saigon or Washington would have gotten off their butts if someone hadn't defied them and gone in after the refugees and orphans.”<sup>23</sup> Despite an arguably failed evacuation mission in Da Nang, and no proper training, support, or protocols for evacuating refugees, Daly was convinced he could do the job. He was rewarded with relentless attention and much public praise, both during and after the events. Yet not every American celebrated Daly's risky rescue. In discussing the problems with Operation Babylift, Senator Edward Kennedy stated:

The situation precipitated by the [Galaxy C-5A] airplane crash was soon exacerbated by the flight to this country of a plane commanded by Edward Daly, President of World Airways. In an unauthorized flight, Daly loaded a plane with 52 orphans and defied

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<sup>21</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 133.

<sup>22</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>23</sup> Harry Minetree, “Heroes of the Vietnam Orphan Lift: High-Flying Ed Daly and His World Airlines,” *People*, June 16, 1975, 2, <https://people.com/archive/heroes-of-the-vietnam-orphan-lift-high-flying-ed-daly-and-his-world-airlines-vol-3-no-23/>.

officials to stop him. When told his plane was not properly equipped to carry infants and sick children, his answer as quoted in *The New Republic* was: “How are they going to stop the plane, shoot it down?” He managed to make the trip safely and upon landing was met by the cheers of a crowd. [...] I am afraid that we have here again a picture of good intentions and poor procedures. While Daly’s behavior might make for a great John Wayne movie, it was hardly a course of action that would meet the approval of anyone concerned with the safety and well-being of the children he transported.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, Daly’s actions in Vietnam truly did have all the makings of an American action hero movie, which garnered more support for him than not. The U.S. government further added to Daly’s popularity by helping him appear as a martyr through publicly denouncing him and threatening him with fines. Yet publications like *People* praised him and his sacrifices, printing an article that read, “Daly’s recent costs in Vietnam—beyond a profound disappointment with the U.S. government and fines from the Immigration Service totaling \$243,000—were close to \$2 million for the refugee and orphan flights, and he paid for them personally.”<sup>25</sup> In furthering his own image as a selfless savior, Daly stated, “God knows how much I’ll probably lose in government contracts for taking decisive action.”<sup>26</sup> Undoubtedly, Daly saved human lives. His actions as a white savior, however, resulted in haphazard and dangerous evacuation attempts that threatened the lives of those he was trying to save while thrusting him into the national spotlight.

Daly was right to label himself as a catalyst in the situation. His hasty yet successful evacuation of Vietnamese children ensured that the U.S. government would get involved through Operation Babylift, which itself proved to be questionably executed and resulted in both success

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<sup>24</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, *Indochina Evacuation and Refugee Problems Part I: Operation Babylift & Humanitarian Needs: Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escape*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., 1975, 86, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2390910002>.

<sup>25</sup> Harry Minetree, “Heroes of the Vietnam Orphan Lift: High-Flying Ed Daly and His World Airlines,” *People*, June 16, 1975, 6, <https://people.com/archive/heroes-of-the-vietnam-orphan-lift-high-flying-ed-daly-and-his-world-airlines-vol-3-no-23/>.

<sup>26</sup> Minetree, “Heroes of the Vietnam Orphan Lift,” 6.



and loss of life. Daly's airlift, along with the public's response to it, also further incited the government to use the evacuation of children as a means of furthering its nation-building and anti-communist agenda in South Vietnam.

### **The U.S. Government Strikes a Deal and Answers the Call**

Contrary to common belief, the concept of Operation Babylift was not originally born out of the United States government's concern for the children in Vietnam. Up until this point, the government had demonstrated little regard for the young lives in Vietnam. This had become increasingly evident to many by the condition of the children upon arriving in the U.S. On April 8, 1975, four days into Operation Babylift, Senator Edward Kennedy, chair of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees, discussed the poor conditions of the arriving children and of the orphanages they came from, which had received years of USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) funding. Kennedy asked testifying USAID administrator Daniel Parker to explain these conditions, to which Parker argued, "I do not think the condition on arrival of orphans making the flight of some 10,000 or 12,000 miles is necessarily an indication of the condition in which they left. This is a rigorous flight. It is a flight halfway around the world."<sup>27</sup> Kennedy, having already determined the true root of the issue, fought back. "You do not get viral pneumonia, chicken pox, dehydration on an American plane in a period of thirty hours. I cannot but believe that the kind of care and condition that is being provided by the personnel on that plane is not superior," he

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<sup>27</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, *Indochina Evacuation and Refugee Problems Part I: Operation Babylift & Humanitarian Needs: Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escape*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., 1975, 14, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2390910002>.

replied.<sup>28</sup> The real problem, he argued, was that the U.S. had simply not cared enough for Vietnam's struggling children of war until now.<sup>29</sup>

To demonstrate his growing argument, Kennedy asked Parker about USAID's prior use of Congressional funding:

Congress did appropriate \$10 million for child care last year [in Vietnam]. As of April 1975, you have only allocated \$5.4 million, just about half of that—excuse me, \$3.9 obligated, \$10 million appropriated, which is a woefully small amount in any event, yet you have only obligated \$3.9 million. You have industrial development, \$77.8 million appropriated, and you have managed to obligate \$77.8 million of that. [...] What does that say about priorities? Can you tell us why [...] you only obligated \$3.9 million? Is it because you do not have bona fide applications from the voluntary agencies, or from your people in the field, about how you can use that money effectively to try to do something about the orphanages?<sup>30 31</sup>

This argument spiraled into discussions about local currency and other details, but the heart of Kennedy's point remained clear: "The U.S. government had never cared enough about helping the poor in Vietnam to make sure that aid money got to them."<sup>32</sup> Now, in the eleventh hour, helping the children was suddenly the nation's priority. Kennedy was candid about the negative role of the U.S. government in this instance. Generally, however, any Western nation's wrongdoings, as per the white savior complex, are overlooked by most individuals in light of the opportunity to save those who previously suffered because of their choices. Moving forward, "Congress was prepared to authorize funds for humanitarian assistance; it would not, however,

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, *Indochina Evacuation and Refugee Problems Part I: Operation Babylift & Humanitarian Needs: Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escape*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., 1975, 14, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2390910002>.

<sup>29</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Congress, *Indochina Evacuation and Refugee Problems*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Congress, *Indochina Evacuation and Refugee Problems*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

continue pretending that South Vietnam could be saved with military aid.<sup>33</sup> Determined not to lose South Vietnam, the Ford administration decided it would play into the public's desire to rescue the children of Vietnam. Doing so would hopefully convince Congress to approve more military aid.

As the North Vietnamese progressed toward Saigon and victory, the Ford administration argued that the South could still be saved. The administration sought to provide its ally with funds to help better defend themselves since the U.S. would not be getting involved again militarily. Congress, however, remained unmoved in its decision not to allocate anything more than humanitarian aid to the conflict in Southeast Asia, which had drained the country both financially and emotionally.<sup>34</sup> Behind closed doors, President Ford feared that South Vietnam may already have lost.<sup>35</sup> Plans began being designed for an evacuation of Americans and some of the South Vietnamese associated with them. This plan, however, was not solely about saving lives. According to Ayako Sahara:

The President's fixation on military aid derived from two strategic military values of the refugees. The first one was that the evacuation of the refugees would facilitate and secure the evacuation of Americans. The second was of one political symbolic value: to show the U.S. as a moral subject that would "save some South Vietnamese," in order to gain public support for U.S. policy and U.S. credibility in Asia.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> T. Christopher Jespersen, "Kissinger, Ford, and Congress: The Very Bitter End in Vietnam," *Pacific Historical Review* 71, no. 3 (2002): 455, doi:10.1525/phr.2002.71.3.439.

<sup>34</sup> Jespersen, "Kissinger, Ford, and Congress," 455.

<sup>35</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>36</sup> Ayako Sahara, "Theater of Rescue: Cultural Representations of U.S. Evacuation from Vietnam," *Journal of American & Canadian Studies*, no. 30 (2012): 68, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=87764333&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Though Operation Babylift had not yet become part of the U.S. government's envisioned withdrawal, in South Vietnam, Western-run orphanages were still trying to make plans to evacuate children who were already in the process of adoption.

In South Vietnam, U.S. officials and the South Vietnamese government denied that the country would fall to the communists. In that same vein, they also denied any impending evacuations despite rumors to the contrary. U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin refused to plan for or confirm any evacuations, believing both that South Vietnam would survive and that such talk would drive Saigon into a panic.<sup>37</sup> On the streets of Saigon, the people could already see that the war was nearing its end. Among them were Western-run orphanage directors Cherie Clark and Rosemary Taylor. Both women sought ways to expedite pending adoptions so they could evacuate as many of their children as possible. The two orphanages worked simultaneously and independently of one another, calling on officials, both Vietnamese and American, to get the documents and approvals they needed to get the adoptees out of the country. Throughout her early endeavors, Clark's requests to expedite the process were denied by the U.S. official in Saigon. She recalls that "despite the crisis overtaking South Vietnam, all visas still had to go through the normal channels, which took months."<sup>38</sup> Taylor fared little better. However, in early April, things began to change.

In late March, Ed Daly made his attempt to evacuate refugees fleeing the advancing North Vietnamese troops in Da Nang. At the U.S. embassy in Saigon, Ambassador Martin, though unyielding in his belief that South Vietnam would survive, heard of Daly's self-assigned

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<sup>37</sup> T. Christopher Jespersen, "Kissinger, Ford, and Congress: The Very Bitter End in Vietnam," *Pacific Historical Review* 71, no. 3 (2002): 460, doi:10.1525/phr.2002.71.3.439.

<sup>38</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

mission in Da Nang and his plans to next begin evacuating orphans from Saigon. Martin advised the Ford administration that they should begin their own evacuation, airlifting the orphans from Vietnam to the United States. Martin had previously worked as a State Department coordinator for a U.N. refugee program and was all too familiar with the plight of refugees.<sup>39</sup> However, his empathy for the thousands of displaced Vietnamese pouring into Saigon was second to his desire to see South Vietnam survive. If the U.S. embassy and the Saigonese government were to stand any chance against the communists, they would need additional aid, supplies, and renewed global support. This seemed a daunting task as most of the world, especially the United States, its citizens, and Congress had no interest in looking back at the war in Vietnam. Martin realized, however, that Daly's actions could have positive effects for his own cause if he could gain government approval.<sup>40</sup>

Frank Snepp was a CIA analyst and counterintelligence officer in Vietnam from 1969 through Saigon's final hours in 1975. He was privy to much of the Embassy's most confidential information and plans, as well as key people, including Ambassador Martin. In recalling Martin's advocacy for evacuating South Vietnam's children, Snepp wrote, "As [Martin] explained in a letter to Saigon's Minister for Refugee Affairs, he hoped that the spectacle of hundreds of Vietnamese babies being taken under the American wing would generate sympathy for the South Vietnamese cause around the world."<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Martin "stressed that this evacuation along with the millions of refugees abandoning Communist-controlled zones, will

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<sup>39</sup> Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 301.

<sup>40</sup> Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983), 397.

<sup>41</sup> Snepp, *Decent Interval*, 301-302.

help create a shift in American public opinion in favor of the Republic of Vietnam. Especially when these children land in the United States, they will be subject to television, radio and press agency coverage and the effect will be tremendous.”<sup>42</sup> The Ford administration, which still hoped to preserve the U.S. nation-building project that was democratic South Vietnam, agreed with Martin.

Under the guise of humanitarianism, the U.S. government began acting as saviors for Vietnamese youth with the implicit intent of achieving its own military and political goals. Beyond hoping to reignite American support both politically and financially for South Vietnam, the Operation Babylift flights would also allow for the discreet evacuation of American personnel from the U.S. Defense Attaché Office, thereby avoiding a panic.<sup>43</sup> Unaware of this, Americans, for the most part, latched onto the idea of saving Vietnam’s orphans of war. Public opinion favored President Ford’s declaration to save the lives of innocent children threatened by communism.

For those who participated in Operation Babylift, including prospective adoptive parents, there was genuine interest in helping the children. Yet application of the white savior complex continues to reveal their actions as uninformed at best, and self-serving and supportive of corrupt American foreign policies at worst. In situations like this, where Americans go beyond their own borders to effect change, Cole asks those involved to consider the larger impacts of their efforts: “Let us begin our activism right here: with the money-driven villainy at the heart of American

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<sup>42</sup> Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983), 397.

<sup>43</sup> Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 302.

foreign policy,” he writes.<sup>44</sup> “To do this would be to give up the illusion that the sentimental need to ‘make a difference’ trumps all other considerations. What innocent heroes don't always understand is that they play a useful role for people who have much more cynical motives.”<sup>45</sup> Americans who so adamantly advocated for the extraction of children from Vietnam out of a sense of compassion simultaneously lent themselves to furthering President Ford and Ambassador Marin’s political agendas in which the children were simply pawns.

While the United States government began conceiving of what would become Operation Babylift, the South Vietnamese government, under President Nguyen Van Thieu, was also working on finding ways to obtain more U.S. military aid and support. With Vietnamese government officials having been approached by both local, Western-run orphanage staff like Clark and Taylor, as well as members of the U.S. embassy, Thieu’s regime began to see the same use for their children that Ford and Ambassador Martin did. In early April, a letter emerged that evidenced this. It was sent to South Vietnam's prime minister, Tran Thien Khiem, from the country's deputy prime minister, Dr. Phan Quang Dan, on April 2:

Subject: Immigration to U.S. of 1,400 Orphans  
Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

At the present time, approximately 1,400 orphans have been brought to Saigon, and are being cared for by international welfare fare agencies prior to being taken to foreign countries where they will be placed with permanent adoptive parents. At present, operations of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Hamlet Building and the Inter-ministerial War Victims Relief Committee have been severely hampered by some complicated situations, among which requiring immediate resolution are the problems. The orphans cited above which must be handled in conjunction with many other important difficulties that we are faced with. Moreover, the whole question of collective

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<sup>44</sup> Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

<sup>45</sup> Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

emigration of this number of orphans mentioned above is further exciting world opinion, particularly in the United States, much to the benefit of the Republic of Vietnam.

Right now, there are two 727s belonging to World Airways that have been waiting all night at the Tan Son Nhut airport, prepared to transport free of charge the emigrating orphans. Mr. Daly, the President of the above-mentioned airlines, is an international national figure. The American Ambassador has also interceded with me to permit the orphans to leave the country together. He stressed, in addition to this emigration issue, how a million refugees and war victims fleeing the areas taken over by the communists would help to turn American public opinion regarding Vietnam, particularly the orphans arriving in the United States, given extensive TV and press coverage with narrated reports from witnesses of the situation, would have considerable influence.

If you agree, Mr. Prime Minister, to approve the emigration of the orphans mentioned above, the Ministry of Social Welfare and Hamlet Building will coordinate with USAID to carefully monitor and control the international welfare agencies' implementation mentation of this operation.

Sincerely,  
Deputy Prime Minister  
Dr. Phan Quang Dan<sup>46 47</sup>

The letter had been marked as “approved,” and the two nations struck a deal. The American public was outraged by the idea that the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments were using the war-torn country’s children in “a political maneuver to gain international sympathy for South Vietnam.”<sup>48</sup> This upset was not enough to stem the tide of national support for the operation, but it did force many to take a closer look at the actions they were supporting and taking part in.

For Clark and Taylor in Saigon, there was no concern over the nature of the intentions behind allowing the children to be evacuated. What was important was that the document was the ticket they needed to begin sending their children abroad. “[The Ford administration] wanted to attempt to get aid for Vietnam—not a bad thing—and hoped that pictures of refugees

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<sup>46</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>47</sup> David Butler, *The Fall of Saigon: Scenes from the Sudden End of a Long War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 222–223.

<sup>48</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.



streaming out would play on the heartstrings,” recalls Clark.<sup>49</sup> “There was a move not to tell anyone else except FFAC, another [orphanage] group, so that Ford could meet the flight as he was trying to get some emergency package passed for Vietnam. As it was we went with Daly and [Ford] lost the photo op.”<sup>50</sup> After FFAC declined Daly’s offer to evacuate children, Clark and FCVN took the available spots. The World Airways flight departed on the evening of Wednesday, April 2.<sup>51</sup> On April 3, President Ford announced the government-backed Operation Babylift program and the following day the first official flight of the operation took off from Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut airport. The military plane, a Galaxy C-5A carrying children from FFAC, crashed shortly after take-off.<sup>52</sup> It was followed by other flights to the U.S. the next day carrying 324 children from FFAC including survivors from the crash.<sup>53 54</sup>

### **American Assistance Based on Emotion and Reward**

As the evacuation flights began bringing Vietnamese children to the United States, Americans interested in saving the children of Vietnam gave statements, shared thoughts, and took actions that belied their often-subconscious desire to benefit from the situation, have an emotionally rewarding experience, and validate their privilege. After the Galaxy C-5A crash, Colleen Ballard of Georgia, a woman struggling with infertility, stated, “Oh my gosh. Here are

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<sup>49</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 156.

<sup>52</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 179.

<sup>54</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

so many kids dead and I can't have any.”<sup>55</sup> In an April 1975 edition of the *New Republic*, Gloria Emerson cited instances demonstrating the benefits and gratification Americans experienced:

Baby holding is the fashionable act to join: Yul Brynner, who has a Vietnamese child of his own now, persuades Hugh Hefner to fly “orphans” from the West Coast to New York in his private playboy plane and the bunnies wash and diaper them. President Ford holds a Vietnamese baby, so does Terence Cardinal Cooke for the television cameras. Bob Hope and Ron Reagan will have to make up for lost time. A man from the Middle West calls the Holt Adoption Service, according to a story from Eugene, Oregon, to say: “I'm a very important person and I've got to have one of those Vietnamese children.”<sup>56</sup>

A staff member at an adoption agency shared: “When I asked [callers] to donate money for food and medicine, many said they only wanted a baby.”<sup>57</sup> Despite the many ways to help the children of Vietnam, adoption was the only thing callers seem to be interested in. Sachs suggested, “For these people, it seemed, adoption satisfied a need that simpler forms of charity couldn't address.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, to donate money would have stripped interested parties of the substantially larger rewards offered by adoption.

As children continued arriving from Vietnam to the Presidio, a U.S. military fort in San Francisco, many were discovered to either not have actually been orphans or to be orphans who were not in the process of being adopted. Tran Tuong Nhu, a California-based native of Hue, Vietnam, volunteered as a translator to communicate with the children. <sup>59</sup> “I went to help and

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<sup>55</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition

<sup>56</sup> Gloria Emerson, “Collecting Souvenirs: Operation Babylift,” *New Republic* 172, no 17 (1975): 8-9, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=9984352&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>57</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>58</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>59</sup> Erika Allen, “From ‘Lucky Encounter’ in Vietnam to 40 Years Married,” *New York Times*, July 05, 2013, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/05/booming/from-lucky-encounter-in-vietnam-to-40-years-married.html>.

saw people were just picking them out like puppies,”<sup>60</sup> she recalled. An onsite nurse compiled a report of adoption cases that arose, and, in one instance, the following was observed:

Family # 1 : Mother and father approx 30 yrs old w/ two sons (3 yrs & 6 yrs old). They were to receive baby A (3 mo. old male). When I placed the infant in the mother's arms, her reactions led me to believe she was not prepared for the baby. She immediately started comparing baby A with baby B (a 2 mo. old male). She made statements such as, ‘This baby (A) is so much smaller than that one (B) and he (A) is older.’ ‘This one (A) doesn't smile.’ ‘It (A) has awful scabs and bumps on his head.’ ‘You know we really wanted a girl, girls are so much cuter and daintier.’ This mother's mood changed when we went outside. They had brought along with them their local newspaper men to cover their story. She then appeared happy to have the child, but she changed back again when the newspaper reporters left. Their other children also made some remarks, marks, ‘I don't like him, Mommy, he is ugly.’ The parents’ reply was ‘You will have to like him, now be quiet.’ This family appeared to be more concerned with the publicity of adopting a Vietnamese orphan than the infant himself. They continually referred to the baby as ‘It’ rather than ‘he.’ The mother did have an appointment with their doctor, but she said, ‘I want him to see our doctor right away because I don't want any of us to get anything.’<sup>61</sup>

The family in this example does not see the child and his situation a result of American intervention and war in his homeland. The mother treats both the situation and the child before her as though they “[exist] simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—”<sup>62</sup> of her and her family. Her behavior upon receiving the child indicated the decision to adopt him had little, if anything, to do with the child himself or the state of his homeland. As the nurse noted, the family was seemingly more interested in publicity than the child. Unlike many others, however, there did not appear to be any pretense or notions of acts of justice or humanitarianism by the family, however misguided. The boy was a means for them to indulge themselves in a publicized emotional experience that validated their privilege.

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<sup>60</sup> Allen, “From ‘Lucky Encounter’ in Vietnam.”

<sup>61</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>62</sup> Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

### Validation through Cultural Superiority and Deeming Vietnamese Parents Unfit

Beyond seeking the emotional experience of saving a child, many Americans began to exhibit feelings and ideas of cultural superiority as they came to suspect “that even the nicest Vietnamese [did] not really love or know how to take care of their offspring.”<sup>63</sup> With the same disregard for Vietnamese culture that the United States had illustrated in the past, its citizens at home and Westerner’s abroad decided that the Vietnamese were unfit to care for their children, regardless of war, as they should be cared for by Western standards. The idea that the Vietnamese had little regard for their children further enabled Americans to provoke within themselves a moral justification for saving the children by taking them. Rosemary Taylor of FFAC further perpetuated this notion. She cited the idea that “Vietnamese women love their offspring and have a strong sense of family” as “the favorite cliché used against our efforts to have children adopted abroad...”<sup>64</sup> Taylor also shared her interpretation of what life was like for abandoned Vietnamese children prior to Western intervention:

The orphanages did not exist. The children were instead abandoned and sacrificed to appease angry gods; infanticide was [practiced]; children who were malformed and who would only be an economic liability, were left to die; the extended family, spoken of so reverently by our sociologists, might sometimes take in a poor relation as a cheap way of acquiring a servant.<sup>65</sup>

Taylor challenged the concept of extended family and community as a safety net for children, and seemingly the whole of Vietnamese culture, as she fought to validate her efforts as a savior.

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<sup>63</sup> Gloria Emerson, “Collecting Souvenirs: Operation Babylift,” *New Republic* 172, no 17 (1975): 9, <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=9984352&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>64</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 221.

<sup>65</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 218.

According to Sachs, international adoption actually did little as a welfare policy and was not what kept South Vietnam's 879,000 orphan children off the streets.<sup>66</sup> Instead, she credited the nation's own an informal foster system "through which relatives and neighbors took individual children into their homes."<sup>67</sup> A 1974 South Vietnamese child welfare report found that out of 1,097 families, 229, or 20.8 percent, had orphans living with them.<sup>68</sup> This was achieved through the Vietnamese Ministry of Social Welfare's 1973 "Orphan at Home" program, which sought to "[help] the orphans to live a better life while remaining with their beloved ones, thus avoiding sending them to orphanages."<sup>69</sup> Though the living conditions these children experienced were considerably more dismal than what a Western country could offer, it allowed for the children to stay within their own culture and community. Taylor had no use for this concept, stating, "The whole idea of a devoted extended family is now propagated by the well-to-do expatriates who naturally wish to stress the noblest practices of their society."<sup>70</sup> For her and other Westerners, the ability of the Vietnamese to care for their own was simply another argument to overcome in their personal mission to save the children.

In the months following the fall of Saigon, some Vietnamese parents and other family members of the adoptees brought to the U.S. began arriving in the States seeking to reclaim their children. For many adoptive parents, this became problematic because having saved the children

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<sup>66</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>67</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>68</sup> Republic of Vietnam Ministry of Social Welfare and LDHB, *Vietnam Children's Basic Problems: Part I: Child Welfare in the Republic of Vietnam* (Saigon), 1974, 7, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2391117003>.

<sup>69</sup> Ministry of Social Welfare, *Vietnam Children's Basic Problems*, 7.

<sup>70</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967-1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 218.

from the orphanages and Communists was not enough. They wanted the children to be theirs indefinitely, regardless of what anyone else wanted. In the wake of losing their country, and often, facing dangerous journeys to reach the United States, Vietnamese refugees found that many adoptive American parents felt it was their place to judge what was best for their adoptive children.<sup>71</sup> They also found that many adoptive parents, and the adoption agencies that placed their children, saw their efforts to regain custody “as cynical attempts to renege on agreements made in good faith.”<sup>72</sup> Hai Thi Popp, known as Lon, was one of these women. Despite arriving in the U.S. before her children, it was a year before she was able to meet her son, Vo Huy Tung, and his adoptive family through FCVN.<sup>73</sup> The child, who was only two when his mother left him in the care of a Catholic priest who promised to send him to the U.S., did not recognize his mother.<sup>74</sup> Lon did not know that the priest turned Vo Huy Tung over to FCVN, but she could prove the document terminating her parental rights was forged.<sup>75</sup>

Vo Huy Tung’s adoptive parents, however, saw no reason to return the child to his birth mother. According to journalist Tracy Johnston, “[the adoptive parents] say they will not give him up because he has no relationship to this strange Vietnamese woman. He is loved and secure in his American home and it would be destructive to take him from the only parents he now knows.”<sup>76</sup> This type of justification, judgment of Vietnamese parents, and refusal to return

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<sup>71</sup> Tracy Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphans,” *New York Times*, May 09, 1976, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/09/archives/torment-over-the-viet-nonorphans-nonorphans.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Knight, “Vietnam 'Orphans' Face New Battle,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1976, accessed December 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/09/26/archives/vietnam-orphans-face-new-battle-natural-parents-are-endeavoring-to.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Knight, “Vietnam 'Orphans' Face New Battle.”

<sup>74</sup> Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphans.”

<sup>75</sup> Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphans.”

<sup>76</sup> Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphans.”

wrongly adopted children was further reinforced by orphanage employees like Rosemary Taylor's colleague, Wende Grant. Reflecting on how Lon gave her other two sons to an American friend who promised to get the children to the U.S. where she could meet them, Grant seemingly questioned her maternal fitness.<sup>77</sup> "Take a hypothetical example. Would you stand in line for two days to get yourself out of a country when you don't know where your children are?" she asked.<sup>78</sup> Even after having visited South Vietnam during the last years of the war and seeing what Vietnamese families faced, Grant demonstrated an inability to see past her own cultural understandings and beliefs. Just as many Americans could not understand or accept why Vietnamese parents would willingly separate from their children, the Vietnamese also struggled to understand the Western logic and judgement they were facing. Lon tried to explain this in an interview with the *New York Times*:

To understand my story, think you are caught upstairs in burning house. To save your babies' lives you drop them to people on the ground to catch. It's good people that would catch them, but then you find a way to get out of the fire too, and thank the people for catching your babies, and you try to take your babies with you. But the people say, 'Oh no, these are our babies now, you can't have them back.' I don't understand. Vietnamese don't do like that with children. We love them too much to do that.<sup>79</sup>

Many Americans struggled to accept that the situation in Vietnam that they were benefiting from had now presented itself in the form of parents on their doorstep demanding their children be returned. Some adoptive parents would decide not to get in between these reunions. Others fought to keep their new children.

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<sup>77</sup> Tracy Johnston, "Torment over the Viet Non-orphans," *New York Times*, May 09, 1976, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/09/archives/torment-over-the-viet-nonorphans-nonorphans.html>.

<sup>78</sup> Johnston, "Torment over the Viet Non-orphans."

<sup>79</sup> Michael Knight, "Vietnam 'Orphans' Face New Battle," *New York Times*, September 26, 1976, accessed December 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/09/26/archives/vietnam-orphans-face-new-battle-natural-parents-are-endeavoring-to.html>.

By late September 1975, approximately one dozen Vietnamese children had been voluntarily returned to their immediate or extended family members, avoiding legal proceedings.<sup>80</sup> Others became embroiled in lawsuits. After discovering children arriving in San Francisco who had families in Vietnam, Nhu reached out to the orphanages involved and the U.S. government. She quickly learned none of them were interested in hearing her findings.<sup>81</sup> Along with two other volunteer Vietnamese translators who shared her experiences at the Presidio, Nhu filed a class action lawsuit, *Nguyen Da Yen et al. v. Kissinger*.<sup>82</sup> The suit charged that “Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of defense James Schlesinger, Attorney General Edward Levi, and seven adoption agencies [brought] children to the United States who were not properly released for immigration.”<sup>83</sup> The suit was met with strong opposition from adoptive parents determined to keep the children for themselves. However, for those children who had not been adopted through proper channels and for whom the orphanages had no documentation, returning to Vietnam became more of a possibility.

This was unacceptable for many of the Americans who had claimed these children. Their reward for saving them was to keep them, or at the very least, be the ones who decided their fate.

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<sup>80</sup> Michael Knight, “Vietnam 'Orphans' Face New Battle,” *New York Times*. September 26, 1976, accessed December 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/09/26/archives/vietnam-orphans-face-new-battle-natural-parents-are-endeavoring-to.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist, “Operation Babylift or Babyabduction: Implications of the Hague Convention of the Humanitarian Evacuation and Rescue of Children,” *International Social Work* 52, no. 5 (2009): 622. doi:10.1177/0020872809337677.

<sup>82</sup> Bergquist, “Operation Babylift or Babyabduction,” 623.

<sup>83</sup> Allison Varzally, *Children of Reunion: Vietnamese Adoptions and the Politics of Family Migrations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 55. <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1462777&site=eds-live&scope=site>.



Joan Thompson, a woman rallying other parents to oppose the *Nguyen Da Yen et al. v. Kissinger* lawsuit, shared her stance on the issue with the *New York Times*:

If there were requests from Vietnamese gals, that they really wanted their kids back, that's hard. But you know most of us have had our hysterectomies and all and we can't have any children of our own. The Vietnamese have so many kids—8, 10, 13—and we don't have any. We want them. We think this is the best country possible—the kids have so much better chance to grow here, be what they want. In Vietnam they would be a fisherman or dirt farmer.<sup>84</sup>

Thompson's statement embodies the core ideas of white savior complex, American exceptionalism, and the white man's burden. In her role as a savior and an American, she has become empowered by her privilege to decide what is best for those whom she set out to help. She sees Vietnam as inferior to the United States and believes it to be America's responsibility to advance and civilize the children in a way Vietnam could not. These beliefs give her agency to fight for what she believes to be hers, for the excess of Vietnamese children, some of which she believes she is owed because of her race, privilege, and willingness to help others. She refuses to forfeit the benefits and emotional experience of helping others by returning the children to their families and culture now that the war has passed. For those like Thompson, exercising the white savior complex in this instance was seemingly validated by the outcome of *Nguyen Da Yen et al. v. Kissinger*, in which the court decided it was in the children's best interest to remain with their adoptive American families.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Tracy Johnston, "Torment over the Viet Non-orphans," *New York Times*, May 09, 1976, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/09/archives/torment-over-the-viet-nonorphans-nonorphans.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Kathleen Ja Sook Bergquist, "Operation Babylift or Babyabduction: Implications of the Hague Convention of the Humanitarian Evacuation and Rescue of Children," *International Social Work* 52, no. 5 (2009): 623. doi:10.1177/0020872809337677.

Even before Saigon fell and Vietnamese families came looking for their children, many in the U.S. had negative responses to the concept of returning the children after the threat of war passed. During the “Saturday Night Special,” a Philadelphia radio talk show, Le Anh Tu, a local Vietnamese woman, asked Americans who favored adoption “if they really cared for the welfare of Vietnamese children, if they would be willing to return the children once peace came.”<sup>86</sup> People responded to the question with shock and refusal.<sup>87</sup> This mindset did not dissipate before the war’s end and the arguments used to validate Operation Babylift at the start continued to be used after its completion to validate permanently keeping the children.

In the weeks leading up to the end of the war, many Vietnamese made a conscious and legal choice to relinquish custody of their children to an orphanage. They forfeited their right to dictate where and how their children would grow up. For many, the hope was that their children would be brought to the United States. Some of those children became part of Operation Babylift. Other Vietnamese, however, did not intend for their children to be taken abroad or permanently adopted; the orphanage was a temporary home until the war had passed. “The Vietnamese [...] traditionally see adoption as something that can occur only within extended families, and thus they looked on the adoption agencies as only temporary sponsors willing to take their children to safety,” Michael Knight noted in 1975. “But the agencies [...] saw the process in American terms of permanent and irrevocable abandonment.”<sup>88</sup> Many of these children were also brought to the U.S., many with no legal documentation, or sometimes, forged

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<sup>86</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>87</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Knight, “Vietnam 'Orphans' Face New Battle,” *New York Times*. September 26, 1976, accessed December 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/09/26/archives/vietnam-orphans-face-new-battle-natural-parents-are-endeavoring-to.html>.

documents releasing them to the orphanage.<sup>89</sup> For those children and their parents, who should decide their fate? Americans undoubtedly had noble intentions of keeping the children safe from the war and communism, an ideology the West often deemed as evil. However, it seems that for many, their intentions were only as good as the benefits they reaped and the power they wielded.

In executing Operation Babylift, Americans perpetually refused to defer to the Vietnamese involved, to ask those they were trying to help how to best help them. As Le Anh Tu said on the “Saturday Night Special,” “You have been killing us with your kindness for twenty years.”<sup>90</sup> Throughout the entire Vietnam War and into its aftermath, American actions continued to be dictated by the white savior mentality. According to Jordan Flaherty, the prototypical savior “is a person who has been raised in privilege and taught implicitly or explicitly (or both) that they possess the answers and skills needed to rescue others, no matter the situation. The message that they are the experts in all things has been reinforced since birth. They are taught that saving others is the burden they must bear.”<sup>91</sup> When considering Flaherty’s description, there seems to be no reason most white Americans of privilege would have consulted the Vietnamese during Operation Babylift or in any other instance. Given the concepts of the white man’s burden and American exceptionalism, both inherent to the behavior of white Americans, it is no wonder that the savior mentality was sustained as America’s adoptive parents fought to keep the children they wanted so badly.

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<sup>89</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>90</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>91</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

Such was also the case with many Westerners in South Vietnam, specifically those working in the orphanages. Women like Cherie Clark and Rosemary Taylor carved out roles for themselves as saviors, intent on rescuing the youth of Vietnam. As with other saviors, their actions stemmed from generally good intentions. However, their inability to identify the roles that the savior mentality and privilege played in informing their actions resulted in as much tragedy as success during and after Operation Babylift.

### Chapter 3: Orphanages, Tragedy, and Questioning the Airlift

In South Vietnam, the desire to evacuate children in the orphanages came from fear for their survival and the hopes of a better future by Westerners and Vietnamese alike. Though there were many foreigners involved in running South Vietnam's orphanages, Cherie Clark of FCVN and Rosemary Taylor of FFAC played two of the biggest roles. This was especially true during Operation Babylift, when both worked frantically to evacuate as many children as possible. Though they worked independently of one another, they both shared the same fears for the children should they stay in Vietnam. When asked what she believed the fate of those children left in Vietnam would be, Clark said she knew they would be dead.<sup>1</sup> Taylor saw it as her religious duty to save the children, writing, “Christianity certainly believed that it was right to free men from the menaces of hostile gods and an enslavement to fate, and uphold the unique preciousness of each human being.”<sup>2</sup> This, in conjunction with her aforementioned views on Vietnamese culture regarding children, inspired her to save these children from their own country. These women’s roles were informed by their own cultural beliefs coupled with an insistence that they could save the children through their efforts, no matter how haphazard they might be. In executing Operation Babylift, they both demonstrated the white savior complex mentality resulting in short- and longer-term ramifications and successes.

#### **Finding Purpose and Validating Privilege Through “Saving” Vietnam**

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<sup>1</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

Rosemary Taylor began her work in Vietnam in 1967 as a social worker sponsored by the Australian Council of Churches.<sup>3</sup> After being relieved of her initial post, Taylor arranged to work independently in Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> She eventually gained a temporary position at Phu My, a homeless shelter and orphanage and by 1975, she had become the director of FFAC overseeing four Saigon-based nurseries.<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> Taylor's work was strongly inspired by the role of Western religion and colonialism in Southeast Asia, which she credited with "[installing] in Vietnam an orphanage system that, while flawed, at least acknowledged the fundamental value of every human life."<sup>7</sup> One of Taylor's colleagues determined that she was "fighting for justice."<sup>8</sup> To that end, her own work was fueled by an unwavering sense that it was her religious duty to bring goodness to Vietnam and to help those who suffered.

Taylor came to see international adoption as the best remedy for the suffering among Vietnam's children by ensuring they had a better life than their native country could offer.<sup>9</sup> Her Australian FFAC colleague, Margaret Moses, shared in this belief, having determined that:

[Any governments] who are unable to protect life but we're responsible for life, and by their inability to give it a priority were responsible for the death of children... such groups should set the children free. Ignore liberty and the pursuit of happiness, focus on life; abdicate responsibility for the children to volunteers... The sole responsibility of the volunteers would be to let the children live and to send them to where they could.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>8</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>9</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 99.

For Moses, this appeared to her colleagues as being as much an effort “to save her soul” as to help the children.<sup>11</sup> To that end, as well as exacting religious justice, Taylor and Moses determined that the best thing South Vietnam could do for its children was turn them over to people like them. This logic is reflective of the white savior mentality and overtly suggests that West knows best. For white Westerners “born with privilege, it’s easy to become so used to that privilege that [they] think of it as the natural order of things” explains Flaherty.<sup>12</sup> Specifically for Taylor, this idea was compounded by her condemnation of the Vietnamese regarding what she saw as an inability to care for their children.<sup>13</sup> Others, like her colleague Peter Truman, drew similar conclusions. While going with Taylor to pick up orphans from another orphanage in 1969, he experienced a cross-cultural encounter that he was unable to understand from a Western perspective and unwilling to understand from a Vietnamese one:

On our arrival at the orphanage we were told, blandly, that all our babies were dead but what mattered, the Vietnamese sister said, there are plenty more! This calm acceptance of, or indifference to, death was perhaps the most difficult aspect of Vietnamese attitudes to come to terms with. There was no good reason for it. At that time Vietnam touched the conscience of the world and there was no shortage of food, clothing or shelter. With certain shining exceptions, the missing ingredients seemed to be love and care.<sup>14</sup>

Taylor and her foreign staff applied their own cultural and social attitudes and beliefs regarding children despite being in an entirely different culture. As a result, the FFAC orphanages “prioritized the care of the children over everything else, an ideology somewhat at odds with Vietnamese culture, which considered children to be a part of the family but not necessarily its

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<sup>11</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>12</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 218.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 31-32.

most precious element.”<sup>15</sup> This understanding of the place children held in Vietnamese culture further enabled Taylor to see international adoption as the only viable, long-term solution for the children.

The white savior-oriented ideologies and the actions they inspired were similar between Clark and Taylor and FCVN and FFAC. Both organizations had emerged in South Vietnam in direct response to the war.<sup>16</sup> Like Taylor, Clark had also arrived on the scene with no experience, instead relying on passion to get the job done.<sup>17</sup> In 1972, Clark found herself moved by the Amerasian situation in Vietnam after reading an article about them in *Ebony* magazine.<sup>18</sup> She decided to take action, first by adopting an Amerasian child, then by volunteering with FCVN, and finally by going to Vietnam to work directly in FCVN’s orphanages.<sup>19</sup> There, she took up the role of director at FCVN.

In assessing Clark’s motivations for moving her family from the U.S. to a war zone, Sachs considered an idea presented by journalist Chris Hedges: “Even with its destruction and carnage, [war] can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living.”<sup>20</sup> People of privilege, like both Clark and Taylor, often become bored, estranged, or disconnected in their own lives.<sup>21</sup> According to activist Caitlin Breedlove, this causes them to

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<sup>15</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>16</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>17</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>18</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 21.

<sup>19</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.



seek “what they perceive as the excitement of belonging to an oppressed group.”<sup>22</sup> Prior to going to Vietnam, Clark described herself as feeling helpless, fighting for a cause, for an oppressed group, that she felt no one else cared about.<sup>23</sup> She first tried to remedy this by adopting an Amerasian child, which allowed her to feel like she was combating the issue more directly.<sup>24</sup> “It felt as if this was the only way I could do something for the most innocent victims of the Vietnam War,” she wrote.<sup>25</sup> The adoption also provided her with an emotional experience that was less about justice and more about meeting her own needs: “Along with that came the joyful anticipation of adding a new child [to the family].”<sup>26</sup> There was a direct relationship between Clark’s need and willingness to help those in Vietnam and the rewards she needed to receive for providing that help.

Clark educated herself about the situation in Vietnam enough to understand the need behind the Amerasians’ need, which she later augmented by working in Vietnam directly.<sup>27</sup> But the underpinnings of Western culture had instilled in her as it did in most white people a subconscious expectation that she could help solve this problem with enthusiasm and that she would be rewarded for her efforts. Latching on to the subconsciously assigned role of white savior in a more intense way than most Americans would, Clark moved to Vietnam to work with

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<sup>22</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

<sup>23</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 22.

<sup>24</sup> Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Allison Varzally, *Children of Reunion: Vietnamese Adoptions and the Politics of Family Migrations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 32.

<http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1462777&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

FCVN—a choice that set her on a new path that would redefine her life and cost her marriage.<sup>28</sup>

These were sacrifices she was willing to make for the experience of saving others, which eventually took her beyond Vietnam to India. Of her collective efforts to help abroad and the emotional rewards she gained from them, Clark recalled, “My life had changed dramatically—from Indiana to Vietnam, and then finally on to India. The common thread behind the thousands of miles of traveling was that I was helping abandoned and orphaned babies and children. I believed I had truly found my purpose in life, and I finally had a sense of belonging.”<sup>29</sup>

Relocating to a foreign country in the name of helping others was undoubtedly as much about the experience, purpose, and belonging she needed herself. Sachs determined that Clark was indeed seeking out a sense of meaning as described by Hedges, which, because of her privilege, she was able to find in a position of power in Vietnam.<sup>30</sup>

To help others while simultaneously benefiting from doing so is not necessarily wrong. However, the white savior complex comes into effect when white people take actions that directly benefit them despite the consequences for the non-white people involved. In the cases of Clark and Taylor, there were negative effects resulting from the help they provided in Vietnam. Examples include evacuating children who were not orphans or not healthy enough to travel, falsifying documentation, and putting the children in dangerous situations. This was all done out of an inherent sense of the “greater good” that both women believed they possessed. For them, if the children stayed in Vietnam, they would certainly die. As white saviors, they not only had a

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<sup>28</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 211.

<sup>29</sup> Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy*, 213.

<sup>30</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

subconscious understanding that they knew best, but they also believed they could do better than the Vietnamese, despite lacking experience or an understanding of Vietnamese culture.

For both Clark and Taylor, there was also an emotional experience to be had in working to save the children, even if they were not trained in running orphanages. The struggles faced by Vietnamese orphans were “nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm,” by the very passion they brought to the orphanages in lieu of experience.<sup>31</sup> Taylor touched on these concepts herself when she discussed why she decided to stay in Vietnam after being relieved from her initial position in 1967: “I was aware that I must have appeared somewhat of an ‘adventuress,’ or at best an amateur, to the personnel of more established organizations. But somehow it didn't occur to me to give up. There was a sea of human need around me; I knew I had the resources to respond, though how to do so had yet to become clear.”<sup>32</sup> Taylor and Clark were both adamant that they could help the Vietnamese children in ways that they felt the Vietnamese themselves had been unable to. Though they did not necessarily recognize that their reasons were, in part, reflective of the white man’s burden mentality and entirely reflective of the white savior complex, there were overt tones of cultural superiority. Furthermore, their need for personal gratification underscored their efforts in helping others.

### **Western Orphanages and Cultural Disconnections**

The efforts of those at FFCN and FCVN were further informed by their inability or unwillingness to become more integrated in the local culture. Though there was certainly collaboration between the organizations and their Vietnamese staff, there was a strong

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<sup>31</sup> Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

<sup>32</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 3.

disconnect from the Vietnamese as a whole that led to unfounded assumptions. These assumptions would eventually play a role in inciting the errors and confusion that would come to plague Operation Babylift. In 1976, one former FFAC employee shared:

No Americans in any of the agencies spoke Vietnamese and so we were operating on lots of assumptions that weren't true. We all thought the Vietnamese didn't adopt kids. But they did. [...] We all thought there was no day care in Vietnam and then discovered there was an immense network of Buddhist day care centers attached to the temples that everyone knew about but us. We all thought mixed-blood children would not be accepted by the Vietnamese, but when I started looking around I saw hundreds of them integrated into families.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that the orphanages, and especially Clark and Taylor, did not completely acknowledge these facts is a direct result of the white savior mentality. In order to validate their work and the emotional rewards and validation it had brought them, they needed to see the Vietnamese as helpless or inadequate in caring for their own. They further created the need for themselves and their work by not acknowledging the many ways in which the Vietnamese were already caring for themselves.

In truth, Westerners fared little better in saving the lives of orphaned children than the Vietnamese. Truman had described how arbitrarily one Vietnamese nun spoke to him about the death of several orphans, deaths he saw no good reason for.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Clark, during her first visit to a non-Western-run orphanage, determined the children were essentially being left by the caretakers to die. “No heroic life-saving efforts were conducted here,” she stated. “The children either survived or they didn't. [...] When we departed, my emotions were in turmoil: I was angry

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<sup>33</sup> Tracy Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphans,” *New York Times*, May 09, 1976, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/09/archives/torment-over-the-viet-nonorphans-nonorphans.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 31-32.

and sad at the same time [...].”<sup>35</sup> In the months that followed, Clark faced overwhelming numbers of sick and dying orphans despite her own efforts. She shared, “We cared for the kids but only so many, when the number of babies went high the number of deaths went higher. We could only take care of a limited number.”<sup>36</sup> Many Vietnamese-run orphanages had undoubtedly been facing the same dilemma for years.

By the time Operation Babylift began, she was seemingly as disconnected from the deaths of children as the many Vietnamese caretakers she and other Westerners had once judged. When a baby girl died in her arms after a mad dash to the airport, a nearby U.S. marine came to take the body away.<sup>37</sup> He returned to ask an exhausted Clark for the baby’s name. She shares, “I simply shrugged and shook my head.”<sup>38</sup> Yet the white savior mentality, the idea that as Westerners, Clark and others could still do better for these children than Vietnam, kept them from admitting that they were, in fact, no better equipped for the job. Rather, they determined that Vietnam as a whole—and especially under communist rule—was the problem and the solution was getting the children to the U.S. They naturally concluded that any of their charges left behind would die.

### **Western Help the Western Way on Western Terms**

Though they may not have been doing it in a Western way or with the means that the Western world had, the Vietnamese managed to care for themselves as a society long before Westerners intervened. Zeigler sought to remind Americans of this in 1975, stating that they had

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<sup>35</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 48–49.

<sup>36</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 200.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 200.

“not paid enough attention to the fact that the Vietnamese have a culture that extends backward in time 2,000 years.”<sup>39</sup> Yet Americans intervened to save Vietnam from communism and Westerners like Taylor and Clark appeared in the midst of a new situation and culture to administer Western methods and beliefs. To this behavior, Breedlove argues that “The assumption that you have something to contribute to communities you know nothing about is ‘an incredibly entitled notion.’”<sup>40</sup> The white savior complex inspires this mentality, which perpetuates a reluctance on the part of Westerners to seek guidance from the people they are trying to help. For many Westerners in Vietnam, this also meant not bothering to learn the language or accept the culture as it is and work within it.

Clark and Taylor’s desire to help and lead despite not having all the proper tools, information, skills, or support directly exemplifies the savior mentality. As white Westerners, both women and their foreign colleagues worked in a different culture trying to fill a need, but on their own terms, and in response to an underlying belief that as Westerners, they were better. “Saviors fundamentally believe they are better than the people they are rescuing,” says Flaherty. “Saviors want to support the struggle of communities that are not their own, but they believe they must remain in charge. The savior always wants to lead, never to follow.”<sup>41</sup> The sense of need and urgency for Clark and Taylor to dispense such help also derived from the mentality that as white Westerners, “saving others [was] the burden they must bear.”<sup>42</sup> While many Vietnamese

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<sup>39</sup> Edward Zigler, “A Developmental Psychologist’s View of Operation Babylift,” *American Psychologist* 31, no. 5 (1976): 333–334.  
<http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pdh&AN=1977-05641-001&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>40</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

<sup>41</sup> Flaherty, *No More Heroes*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>42</sup> Flaherty, *No More Heroes*, Kindle Edition.

undoubtedly benefited from the efforts made by those at FFAC and FCVN, the methods and ideologies employed by these Western groups would come under scrutiny after Operation Babylift began. The more questionable actions of the orphanages, especially as they prepared to evacuate, came to light in the wake of the Galaxy C-5A crash which carried children and staff from FFAC.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Startling Execution of Operation Babylift**

While Clark, Taylor, and their colleagues demonstrated white savior complex ideology during the years leading up to Operation Babylift, the operation itself saw the mentality play out in actions and decisions that would have both successful and dire outcomes. Both Taylor and Clark were sure that the approaching North Vietnamese would kill the Amerasians. Clark also felt strongly that the other Vietnamese children would suffer as well.<sup>44</sup> In an interview with Sachs, Clark shared:

It seemed like it was going to be the end of the world, you know? The banks were closed. The city was in chaos. It seemed like there wasn't a tomorrow. Some of our precious babies... if somebody would have told me I had to leave them because I didn't have paperwork, I would have died. Because, leave them to what? Who was going to take care? Where would we have taken them? Where was the milk? I mean that whole sector of babies would have died, because there was no one to take care of them.

For Clark as well as Taylor, the only option was to get as many children out as possible. But the rapid advances of the North Vietnamese military brought South Vietnam to a state of panic and even the orphanages began hastily doing whatever possible to evacuate the children, regardless of the consequences. To that end, the safety of the children was at times superseded by the need

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<sup>43</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>44</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

to relocate them to the United States. Sick children were not to be left behind and further risking their health was a gamble that orphanage staff was willing to take.<sup>45</sup>

The wellbeing of the children was further put at risk as they were put on planes that were intended to transport military equipment, not children. Taylor described the conditions the children faced as she helped put the first load of them on a U.S. Air Force Galaxy C-5A:

As I walked up the stairs carrying a baby, I was momentarily stunned [...]. The first children were taken to the upper level which had a passenger configuration. The babies, sweltering and screaming, were strapped tightly, two to a seat, by the well-meaning air force personnel, who were helping us board the children. The babies were not supported adequately as there were not enough cushions available. I followed after, trying to prevent them from strangling themselves by slipping under the seat belts or smothering as they slid over on top of each other. My mind was numb with horror at the distress of the children...<sup>46</sup>

The conditions aboard were abhorrent. The infants were placed in the passenger compartment on the second level while the older children were placed in the cargo hold, which “had no seats, only a web of netting strapped across the floor for the children to sit on and, if necessary, grab onto.”<sup>47</sup> An estimated 228 children were on board, most “cramming the upper level beyond capacity.”<sup>48</sup> <sup>49</sup> The number of escorts to care for them was, according to Taylor, “far too low,” consisting of just nine women.<sup>50</sup> Taylor admittedly had faith in these women, despite their numbers, to care for children during the trip.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>46</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 162.

<sup>47</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>48</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>49</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 162.

<sup>50</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 162.

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, *Orphans of War*, 162.



As with many aspects of the evacuation, the flight may have been dangerous, but as far as Westerners were concerned, it was better than staying in Vietnam. These children were to be saved, no matter how dismal the methods. In both the U.S. government and the orphanage staff's rush to evacuate the children, much larger issues than proper seating were overlooked. As Christine Leivermann of FFAC overheard while on the Galaxy C-5A, this plane model "had a history of design problems," which both the U.S. military and the manufacturer, Lockheed, knew about.<sup>52</sup> Other flights, even without dire manufacturing problems, were also poorly equipped for the safe transportation of children. FCVN staff who were putting children on another flight noted that it had no seats and was suffocatingly hot.<sup>53</sup> The children were "loaded onto the metal floor, some in cardboard boxes, but most on [...] straw mats..."<sup>54</sup> The pilot, refusing to take luggage, which contained all the milk, formula, and medical supplies, kicked it off the plane. The plane then took off, tilting sharply upward as it climbed.<sup>55</sup> "None of us were secure," Clark shared, "and we all slid toward the rear of the plane, forming a massive melee of bodies."<sup>56</sup> The idea that the only way to secure the children's safety was to evacuate them prompted Westerners to overlook clear safety issues, risking the lives of the children to validate their need to be saviors. When U.S. and Saigonese officials had earlier told Ed Daly, he could not evacuate orphans due to safety issues with his planes, the *San Francisco Chronicle* asked, "They're safer on the ground

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<sup>52</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>53</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 201.

<sup>54</sup> Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy*, 202.

<sup>55</sup> Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy*, 202.

<sup>56</sup> Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy*, 202.

in South Vietnam????”<sup>57</sup> The same day that question was posed, the first official Operation Babylift flight crashed. For those children and others, they truly would have been safer where they were.

The collective execution of Operation Babylift is perhaps most glaringly symbolized by the crash of the C-5A Galaxy. Approximately fifteen minutes after takeoff, the cargo door locks failed, and the doors themselves tore off. The plane crashed in a rice paddy field outside Saigon, killing 78 of the children onboard.<sup>58</sup> The tragedy, which one American said struck the U.S. in the same way the assassination of John F. Kennedy had, did not deter further pursuit of the evacuation. For many Americans, though, the crash brought about the sobering realization that Operation Babylift may not be as just as initially thought. People began speaking out against the operation and questioning—if not condemning—the efforts of Westerners in Vietnam. Yale psychologist Dr. Edward Zigler argued that, “[These children] are being put on planes deathly sick, in a crash one day, on a plane the next. If one of them dies of illness because of our haste, we'll all be guilty. This can't be in the best interest of the children.”<sup>59</sup> Some people saw the pattern of American intervention in Vietnam and tragedy. As one Vietnamese said, “It is awful, but somehow that crash of the orphan plane is symbolic of America's experience in Vietnam. It is your last hurrah.”<sup>60</sup> The crash not only undermined the public’s perception of the operation, but

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<sup>57</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>58</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Flaste, “Controversy Is Growing,” *New York Times*, April 09, 1975, accessed December 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/09/archives/controversy-is-growing-airlift-of-vietnamese-children-evokes.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Malcolm W. Browne, “A Deep Bitterness Toward U.S.,” *New York Times*, April 05, 1975, accessed December 29, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/05/archives/a-deep-bitterness-toward-us.html>.

it also revealed many issues associated with the foreign-run orphanages in Vietnam. These issues stemmed from attempts by white Westerners in Vietnam's orphanages putting their need to fulfill the role of saviors ahead of any consideration for the long-term ramifications of their actions.

### **The Mad Dash: Too Tired to Care**

As Vietnamese children began arriving in the U.S. after the Galaxy crash, the shortcuts that FFAC and FCVN staff had taken began to reveal themselves.<sup>61</sup> Confusion over missing documentation, forged documents terminating parental rights, cultural misunderstandings, and the discovery that many children were not actually orphans all cast a shadow of doubt over the operation's necessity and humanitarian nature.<sup>62 63</sup> There were issues with identifying many of the children, including survivors from the Galaxy whose records were destroyed with the plane.<sup>64</sup> In fact, no one was entirely sure exactly how many children had been on the flight.<sup>65</sup> Other children were found to be wearing identification bracelets that often had made up names on them, the result of inadequate record keeping and "frantic last-minute form-filling that [Taylor and Clark] had engaged in..."<sup>66</sup> "Some of the names we fabricated made no sense at all," admitted Clark. "We were too tired to care; at that late stage it didn't matter if we had a boy

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<sup>61</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>62</sup> Barbara M. Brown, "Operation Babylift and the Exigencies of War - Who Should Have Custody of 'Orphans'?" *Northern Kentucky Law Review* 7, no. 1 (1980): 81. <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsggo&AN=edsgcl.1472364&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>63</sup> Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 302.

<sup>64</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>65</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>66</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

named Sue.”<sup>67</sup> As more children arrived, it was realized that not only did some of the children have families, but they were from the middle class.<sup>68</sup> As the volunteer interpreter Nhu had learned, many of the children did not know where they were or what was happening to them.<sup>69</sup> They told her they had families back in Vietnam and were only meant to be in the orphanages temporarily.<sup>70</sup> For many Americans, what had begun as a humanitarian mission began to look to many like kidnapping. Many other people, however, took issue with the execution of the airlift, not the concept itself.

Well after the airlifts ended, orphanage staff faced backlash from many Americans over the way that they managed the children and the evacuations. During a custody battle between a Vietnamese mother and adoptive American parents in 1976, lawyer Mort Cohen pointed out the long-term consequences of the orphanages’ methods.<sup>71</sup> “The agencies are playing God,” he stated. “We’ve seen the files—we had to get a court order to do it—and they are a mess. First, an affidavit saying, ‘This child is named such and such and was released by such and such an orphanage and is x years old.’ Then a second affidavit saying, ‘No, that’s wrong. The child’s name is ...’ They don’t want anyone to see their mistakes.”<sup>72</sup> That year, Zeigler also spoke out about the serious neglect that had become apparent after a year of reflection. “Whatever physical dangers confronted these children while in Vietnam, the haste and unpreparedness of the airlift

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<sup>67</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 195.

<sup>68</sup> Tracy Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphans,” *New York Times*, May 09, 1976, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/09/archives/torment-over-the-viet-nonorphans-nonorphans.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>70</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>71</sup> Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphans.”

<sup>72</sup> Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphans.”

could only have subjected them to further danger,” he argued.<sup>73</sup> “In retrospect it is now clear that the true villain was neither the adoptive parents nor their critics, but rather the poor planning (or lack of planning) behind Operation Babylift.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the adoption agencies and orphanages experienced little peace in the months and years following the evacuation as they were quickly called upon to explain the choices they had made.

Some agencies, like Holt International, which also evacuated children from Vietnam, agreed that errors related to the evacuation needed to be addressed. Holt’s executive director, John E. Adams argued that any children accidentally taken in the evacuation or released by their parents due to the turmoil in Vietnam at the time should be returned to their parents as soon as possible.<sup>75</sup> One FFAC staff member also admitted that despite feeling confident in their efforts in Vietnam, “it’s just too difficult to go mucking about a foreign country you know nothing about and take out its children.”<sup>76</sup> Clark and Taylor, however, were among many others from FCVN and FFAC who refused—or were unable—to see that, regarding their actions, the ends did not always justify the means.

### **Life Takes Precedence: White Savior Defenses and Justifications**

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<sup>73</sup> Edward Zigler, “A Developmental Psychologist’s View of Operation Babylift,” *American Psychologist* 31, no. 5 (1976): 331.  
<http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pdh&AN=1977-05641-001&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>74</sup> Edward Zigler, “A Developmental Psychologist’s View of Operation Babylift,” *American Psychologist* 31, no. 5 (1976): 334.

<sup>75</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>76</sup> Tracy Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphan,” *New York Times*, May 09, 1976, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/09/archives/torment-over-the-viet-nonorphans-nonorphans.html>.

The potential long-term consequence for the children being evacuated from Vietnam played almost no role in informing the decisions made by Taylor and Clark. In defense of her actions and those of anyone trying to get the children out of Vietnam, Taylor said that “All these arguments become irrelevant to someone personally acquainted with the practical human dimensions of the problem. Life itself must take precedence over questions of colour, culture, legal documentation, national image, or possible adolescent confusion.”<sup>77</sup> She presented her argument as though it were a widely accepted fact: life supersedes all. But the context behind her statement and her objectives and beliefs during Operation Babylift suggest that what Taylor was really arguing was that the chance for non-white people to have a life in a Western country must take precedence over any other considerations or arguments.

Clark offered a deeper look into the concepts behind an argument like this. When asked how she felt during the evacuation about the children growing up completely separated from their native culture, she stated: “It was the last thing from my mind. I don’t believe that the thought ever once entered my mind, ever. It was life or death. Culture didn’t factor in for me, it wasn’t even a topic, something I could think of.”<sup>78</sup> She also shared that she had no fears or concerns about relocating the children and placing them with new families. “I was only thinking of life,” she said.<sup>79</sup> In hindsight, she admitted, “I cannot say that rushing in to help these kids was right or not but at the time these were only children already in our care and we had to leave.”<sup>80</sup> The argument over whether Clark’s actions, others’, and the U.S. government’s were right or

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<sup>77</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 222.

<sup>78</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Cherie Clark, interview.

<sup>80</sup> Cherie Clark, interview.

wrong are secondary to understanding their underlying motivations as white saviors. Clark and Taylor's arguments expose an underlying sense of cultural superiority over the Vietnamese. By inserting themselves into the situation in Vietnam and dictating the fate of the children, Clark and Taylor also demonstrated an inherent understanding that as white people, they were naturally capable and responsible for saving these non-white people regardless of the consequences for those they were saving.

The evacuation efforts made by Westerners in Vietnam before the North Vietnamese victory demonstrated how deeply they cared about actively saving South Vietnam's children. The willingness and desire that inspired those like Cherie Clark and Rosemary Taylor to relocate to war-torn Vietnam further evidences this desire to help others. While they were consciously motivated to do this for generally noble reasons, their actions were more deeply informed by a need for emotionally rewarding and fulfilling experiences, a desire to find purpose for themselves. They were also driven by subconscious white Western cultural underpinnings, that for their entire lives, reinforced the ideas that they could enter a non-white culture and save them by doing what they believed to be the best courses of action despite not necessarily having the skills to truly help. Both women arrived in Vietnam with the goal of helping those victimized by war, yet they intended to do so with passion rather than skill. Their motivations, conscious or otherwise, fit within Teju Cole's white savior complex framework. Specifically, they reflect the concepts that "the world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm," and "this world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—of white people..."<sup>81</sup> As South Vietnam was falling around them, Clark and Taylor benefited as much, if

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<sup>81</sup> Teju Cole, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic*, March 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

not more, as those they helped. Their inability to see this and the undertones of cultural and racial superiority their actions presented would, however, ultimately cause them to do more harm than good in some cases.

Undoubtedly, Clark and Taylor sacrificed their time and effort—even putting their lives in danger—to help in the endless and daunting task of caring for thousands of children, many struggling to survive. Both recounted their experiences, from the wonderful to the excruciating, in their memoirs. Their many hardships, later added to by public scrutiny after their haphazard choices were revealed during Operation Babylift, allowed them to depict themselves as, essentially, misunderstood martyrs. This is yet another way that they exemplify the white savior mentality. According to Breedlove, “Most savior types [speak] of themselves as martyrs but are actually doing exactly what they want to do [...].”<sup>82</sup> Clark and Taylor are candid about the moments of joy they benefited from and the suffering that plagued them. It is enough to make one forget about the Vietnamese, seemingly relegated to the background in narratives about white Westerners trying to do good while struggling to survive in a country at war.

In the end, Clark and Taylor argue that they did what was best in an impossible situation. Their ultimate defense is that no one could ever understand what their experience was like.<sup>83</sup> Yet they put themselves in that situation with the self-assigned task of saving others, only to implement methods that, while succeeding in saving many lives, also had severe ramifications. Many of the children they and other Westerners helped evacuate found new families and were indeed saved. But many others arrived in a strange land, some separated from their families,

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<sup>82</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

<sup>83</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.



others without so much as a name. Others, as in the case of the first Operation Babylift flight, died. This all happened because Westerners privileged enough to intervene as saviors in a Western-created conflict needed to find their own purpose while validating themselves and their cultural beliefs. But after the majority of Westerners fled and Saigon fell, the fears and rumors that inspired Clark, Taylor, and the U.S. government to evacuate the children proved to be just that: fears and rumors. When left again to their own devices in a country emotionally and physically scarred from war, the Vietnamese defied American expectations.

## Chapter 4: After the Fall

The fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese Communist forces was essentially bloodless.<sup>1</sup> The bloodbath theory, much anticipated by the U.S. and South Vietnamese, did not come to pass. Despite this, those who relied on the theory as a means of justifying their evacuation efforts—their efforts as white saviors—continued to reiterate the validity of their concerns. When asked about the bloodbath theory during an interview in August 1975, President Ford stated, “I think it was a legitimate concern and apprehension. From the reports we have gotten in South Vietnam, at least in the Saigon area, there doesn’t seem to have been that, for which I am very thankful.”<sup>2</sup>

While there was not an outright slaughter, the Communists did send many South Vietnamese associated with the U.S. or Saigon government, religious groups, and anti-communist behavior to reeducation camps.<sup>3 4</sup> Some were detained for months or even years, while others never returned at all.<sup>5</sup> Despite her certainty that the Amerasian children would be killed by the Communists, Cherie Clark also acknowledged that the theory proved wrong: “I have many dear Vietnamese friends, some alive to this day, so of course it is a relief that there wasn’t an actual bloodbath, but I have many friends who spent up to twelve years in education who wished they had died. There are many in Vietnam who will say that in some parts of the

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<sup>1</sup> David Butler, *The Fall of Saigon: Scenes from the Sudden End of a Long War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 469.

<sup>2</sup> President Gerald R. Ford, interview by Frank Cormier, Helen Thomas, and Ralph Harris, August 8, 1975. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0248/whpr19750808-010.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn B Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2017), 569.

<sup>5</sup> Ward and Burns, *Vietnam War*, 569.

country [Amerasians] were killed. I personally don't know if that happened at all.”<sup>6</sup> Though the Amerasians may have fared better than many had expected, Clark still maintains that evacuating the children—Amerasian or otherwise—was a valid move.<sup>7</sup> In large part, she attributes this to her continued belief that after the Westerners left, the remaining children were abandoned by South Vietnamese caretakers and Northerners alike.<sup>8</sup>

In the narrative many Westerners created to further validate their actions in Vietnam, especially ones as extreme as life-threatening evacuations and international adoption, the orphans would be entirely abandoned if the Communists won.<sup>9</sup> It was also believed that the South Vietnamese who worked at FCVN and FFAC, as well as Vietnamese-run orphanages and local hospitals, would not risk their lives for their remaining charges.<sup>10</sup> In 2018, Clark reiterated this narrative, sharing her belief that “There was one thing and one thing only for those we left: death. Because no one was rushing in to care for them and the staff was fleeing themselves and hid for decades that they had worked for us.”<sup>11</sup> While many South Vietnamese did go to great lengths to hide any affiliations they had with the U.S., the idea that even the caretakers would leave masses of children to die harkens back to Rosemary Taylor's notions that the Vietnamese were unfit to care for children. It also reflects validation for the subconscious understanding white saviors have that they are responsible for saving those who can't or won't save themselves.

When asked if her thoughts on the situation had changed, much like they had appeared to in her 2005 interview with Dana Sachs, Clark admitted, “Some years back they had but as I get

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<sup>6</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Cherie Clark, interview.

<sup>8</sup> Cherie Clark, interview.

<sup>9</sup> Cherie Clark, interview.

<sup>10</sup> Cherie Clark, interview.

<sup>11</sup> Cherie Clark, interview.

older I feel we did the only thing we possibly could do.”<sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup> She had since re-established faith in the narrative and beliefs she had held during the end of the war: “There was no battalion of nannies marching into Saigon to pick up the pieces. All of the patients in hospitals died, why not all of the babies? It is not even possible to think that someone would have come to take the children.”<sup>14</sup> These assumptions may have been enough to help bring Operation Babylift to fruition, but much like the bloodbath theory, they did not come to pass.<sup>15</sup> Both the South and North Vietnamese defied Western expectations, proving yet again that American intervention was based more on rewards, emotional experiences, and a sense of cultural superiority than on truly understanding and helping Vietnam.

### **Vietnam Defies American Expectations**

After most of the Westerners had left Vietnam and the North Vietnamese began the process of reunifying the country, life, in many ways, continued on as normal.<sup>16</sup> North Vietnamese caretakers, which Clark determined would never emerge, had in fact, been waiting anxiously to pick up where the Westerners left off.<sup>17</sup> One communist leader, Nguyen Thi Loan, took on the role of overseeing forty of Saigon’s orphanages, with about 8,000 children, shortly after the Northern victory.<sup>18</sup> “I was burning to go down [to Saigon] early to have direct involvement with the children,” Loan shared in a 2006 interview.<sup>19</sup> North Vietnam’s established

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<sup>12</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>13</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Cherie Clark, interview.

<sup>15</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>16</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>17</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>18</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>19</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

Department of Social Welfare and Invalids, which Loan was part of, set to work caring for the children. She confirmed that many South Vietnamese had remained with children who, despite Western predictions, had never been abandoned or left unattended.<sup>20</sup> “In the orphanages, both public and private, there were very good, kind people,” Loan shared. “The nuns were really good. It seemed to me that they did it for the sake of their god. They stayed and took care of the children.”<sup>21</sup> This was further evidenced in an interview with Huong, a childcare worker at Saigon’s largest orphanage, Go Vap.

During the North Vietnamese arrival, Huong and her South Vietnamese colleagues were nervous about what would happen, but they did not abandon the children they were responsible for.<sup>22</sup> Thinking back on that time, she stated, “If you were afraid, you were just afraid. Every room still had dozens of children in it. It wasn’t like you could say, ‘I’m too afraid, so I quit.’ If you were going to die, you’d just die. That’s it.”<sup>23</sup> They continued caring for Vietnam’s weakest and most vulnerable children just as they had done before Western intervention.<sup>24</sup> Sachs determined that “most South Vietnamese did what Huong did. They waited and watched. They changed diapers, fed children, cooked food, washed dishes.”<sup>25</sup> Despite the fear-inducing theories and assumptions made and acted upon by many Westerners and South Vietnamese, “Vietnam’s orphanages remained fairly calm and stable during the crisis that took place [...] at the end of

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<sup>20</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>21</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>22</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>23</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>24</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>25</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

April 1975.”<sup>26</sup> Though it flew in the face of the beliefs held by many Westerners who had worked in Vietnam’s orphanages, this reality was somewhat expected by others.

Some Americans who had spent time in Vietnam had previously responded to Operation Babylift with arguments against the bloodbath theory and the anti-communist narrative. An American in Saigon told the *New York Times*, “The Communists have an excellent record in looking after children. Orphans here under the Communists would probably be better off than under the present Saigon Government.”<sup>27</sup> In the U.S., Nhu further supported this notion. In arguing the validity of the need for the airlift, she asked, “What is this terror Americans feel that my people will devour children? There are 22,000 day care centers in the North. They love children and take care of them.”<sup>28</sup> These arguments largely questioned the overall motivation behind the endeavors of white saviors like those at FFAC and FCVN and were consistently challenged by many of its Western staff. When asked, “What do you say when people suggest that Communist governments put child welfare high on their list of priorities—that the children whom you rescued from orphanages might have been placed in Vietnamese homes under the new regime?,” Wende Grant of FFAC replied, “I tell them that social reform is one thing, but most of our children would be dead by the time it actually happened.”<sup>29</sup> The unyielding

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<sup>26</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>27</sup> Malcolm W. Browne, “A Deep Bitterness Toward U.S.,” *New York Times*, April 05, 1975, accessed December 29, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/05/archives/a-deep-bitterness-toward-us.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Flaste, “Controversy Is Growing,” *New York Times*, April 09, 1975, accessed December 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/09/archives/controversy-is-growing-airlift-of-vietnamese-children-evokes.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Tracy Johnston, “Torment over the Viet Non-orphans,” *New York Times*, May 09, 1976, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/05/09/archives/torment-over-the-viet-nonorphans-nonorphans.html>.

determination that death was imminent was a driving factor behind the white savior mentality and a relentless source of justification for every effort made.

Even after Clark and Taylor's greatest fears about mass child death did not come to fruition, they never relented in defending their logic. Rather, they changed tactics. For years to come, they would argue against those who questioned what they did by responding with some variation of the idea that, "It isn't possible for you to understand what it was like, or anyone."<sup>30</sup> Though few Westerners shared Clark's and Taylor's experiences in Vietnam, the reality of what happened after they evacuated is indisputable. As the Vietnamese filled the roles once managed by Westerners, the white savior constructed narrative that created a need for Westerners to spirit thousands of Vietnam's children away fell apart. Life in the new Vietnam was hardly easy, however, and its people—particularly the children that Americans had worried so much about—needed help.<sup>31</sup> Having achieved its own goals, however, the U.S. would no longer assist the Vietnamese. Rather, it would work to cripple them at many turns.

### **U.S. Economically Cripples Vietnam and the Children Left Behind**

As a newly reunited nation working to heal its wounds and reestablish itself after decades of war, Vietnam struggled. The orphanages had a difficult time keeping the children fed and meeting their medical needs. "We couldn't provide them with everything they needed," Loan admitted. Now that the Communists had won, and the U.S. had evacuated as many children as it could, the Americans cut their losses. In a seemingly counterintuitive move regarding helping at-risk Vietnamese children, the U.S. expanded its previous embargo on North Vietnam to the

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<sup>30</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

entire country as well as newly communist Cambodia.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the U.S. government barred aid of any kind to Vietnam or Cambodia and vetoed membership of the new Vietnam in the United Nations.<sup>33</sup> As historian Marilyn B. Young put it, “Congress... declared a plague on all Indochinese houses.”<sup>34</sup> Americans chose to sacrifice the welfare of Vietnam’s children, whom they had been so concerned about that they arguably kidnapped many of them, in order to punish those implementing an ideology they disagreed with. There was no longer a way for the U.S. to help the Vietnamese by dominating them or directly benefiting from acting as saviors.

The United States’ abandonment of Vietnam after the fall of Saigon put Operation Babylift in greater perspective for many Americans. Some, like former Saigon-based CIA analyst Frank Snepp, surmised the operation was a fraud from the start.<sup>35</sup> Zigler expressed concern over the long-term ramifications of Americans believing they had completed their mission:

... The airlift episode was little more than a tokenistic effort. A danger of tokenistic efforts lies in giving the appearance that a great deal is being done, which in turn interferes with moving on to more honest and realistic broad-scale efforts. We cannot construct a sound social policy to meet the needs of the children of Vietnam if we believe that we have fulfilled our responsibilities to those children by transporting 2,000 of them here. What is needed at this critical juncture of America's involvement in Vietnam is a comprehensive plan of assistance for the babylift children, for the refugees, and for the human and physical reconstruction of Vietnam.<sup>36 37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), Kindle Edition.

<sup>33</sup> Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>34</sup> Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945–1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), Kindle Edition.

<sup>35</sup> Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 302.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Zigler, “A Developmental Psychologist’s View of Operation Babylift,” *American Psychologist* 31, no. 5 (1976): 332.

<http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pdh&AN=1977-05641-001&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>37</sup> Zigler, “A Developmental Psychologist’s View,” 335-336.



Ziegler's sentiments echoed earlier arguments made by Senator Edward Kennedy that the babylift would do little aside from provide Americans with the emotional reward of feeling as though they did their part. “[It] is a mistake to think about all Americans adopting 850,000 orphans or half orphans,” he argued. “... But what is important, however, is that we look at the need for the people who are still in Vietnam and care for them there; and the orphans, the other war victims there. ... We do not want [...] to assuage the American conscience by the fact that we are going to adopt 30,000 and forget the other 820,000 that are still over there.”<sup>38</sup> Kennedy and Ziegler both exhibited far greater understanding of America’s responsibility to South Vietnam. They also unknowingly combatted the white savior complex mentality.

Unfortunately, the majority of Americans were already pushing on with Operation Babylift, intent to satisfy their need for catharsis and closure. After evacuating as many children as it could before the communist victory, the U.S. severed ties with Vietnam. On April 23, a week before the last Americans evacuated, President Ford declared, “Today America can again regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. [...] As far as America is concerned, the time has come to look forward to an agenda for the future, to unify to bind up the nation’s wounds, and restore it to health and optimistic self-confidence.”<sup>39</sup> The American endeavor in Vietnam came to a close, despite failing to evacuate the thousands of South Vietnamese who had

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<sup>38</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, *Indochina Evacuation and Refugee Problems Part I: Operation Babylift & Humanitarian Needs: Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escape*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., 1975, 27. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2390910002>.

<sup>39</sup> Gerald R. Ford, “President Ford’s Address at Tulane University” (speech, New Orleans, LA, April 23, 1975), The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Digital Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/1252291excerpt.pdf>.

been affiliated with the U.S. or devising a plan to assist the Amerasians—America’s undeniable responsibility—who were left behind.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Fate of the Amerasians**

After Vietnam was reunified, the Amerasian children were not massacred, but most experienced discrimination and a poor quality of life, including poverty and homelessness. Anh Nguyen Tuong grew up under the new communist regime. Though he is not Amerasian, he witnessed what life was like for those who looked different in the years following the fall of Saigon. He recalls one African-Amerasian child he knew of through church.<sup>41</sup> “In comparison with my [life], his life was even more difficult for him in the new Vietnam,” Tuong recalls. “I think he was not allowed to go to school. Other kids constantly bullied him.”<sup>42</sup> Cherie Clark also observed how Amerasians fared in the new Vietnam when she returned to the country in 1988 to work with them. She discovered that many of “the young girls were prostitutes, none of the children were allowed in school and many had been used as slaves by families who took them in. They missed out on not only their childhood but much chance of a normal life moving forward.”<sup>43</sup> In a culture that emphasizes pure bloodlines, Amerasians continued struggling to find a place in Vietnam. Eventually the U.S. would come to address its responsibility to the Amerasians, but for many, it was considered to be too little, too late.<sup>44</sup>

The United States government turned its attention back to the estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Amerasians it left behind through the Amerasian Act of 1982 and the Amerasian Homecoming

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<sup>40</sup> T. Christopher Jespersen, “Kissinger, Ford, and Congress: The Very Bitter End in Vietnam,” *Pacific Historical Review* 71, no. 3 (2002): 473, doi:10.1525/phr.2002.71.3.439.

<sup>41</sup> Anh Nguyen Tuong, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 7, 2018

<sup>42</sup> Anh Nguyen Tuong, interview.

<sup>43</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Cherie Clark, interview.

Act of 1988.<sup>45 46 47</sup> These efforts became a continuation of the white savior complex mentality exercised by the U.S. during Operation Babylift. The laws were intended to take responsibility for the Amerasian children—many of whom were now young adults—yet they were created and presented in a way that put the U.S. in the role of savior. This is overtly evidenced in the speech President Ronald Reagan gave in 1982 upon enacting the Amerasian Act:

Today I'm signing into law a legislation that comes to grips with a problem that I think should touch every American's heart. During the last three decades, when tens of thousands of our airmen, soldiers, marines, and sailors went to Southeast Asia and Korea to prevent aggression and protect the vital interests of our country, a number of Amerasian children were born. When the fathers returned to the United States, far too often innocent children were left without parent or without a country. Through no fault of their own, these children have frequently lived in the most wretched of circumstances and often have been ostracized in the lands of their birth.<sup>48</sup>

In his speech, Reagan speaks of the Amerasians as though they are not part American but instead places them in a white man's burden-inspired narrative, where it is again seen as America's responsibility to save others. Furthermore, this speech places no responsibility on the Americans and U.S. organizations, specifically the U.S. military, for the creation and abandonment of the Amerasians. As with the Vietnam War itself, Americans appeared in the self-assigned role of saviors for the people suffering in a situation that the U.S. created in the first place.

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<sup>45</sup> Fox Butterfield, "Orphans of Vietnam: One Last Agonizing Issue," *New York Times*, April 13, 1975, accessed December 01, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/13/archives/orphans-of-vietnam-one-last-agonizing-issue.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Sue-Je Lee Gage, "The Amerasian Problem: Blood, Duty, and Race," *International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2007): 99. <http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=24305369&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>47</sup> Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), ix. [http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_Cover](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover).

<sup>48</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Signing a Bill Providing for the Immigration of Certain Amerasian Children," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1983), 1372.

Another facet of the Amerasian laws that reflected the white savior mentality was how they benefited Americans more than the Amerasians. As with Operation Babylift, the new laws proved to be more about making Americans feel validated and good than actually helping others. For example, despite being half-American, and therefore entitled to American citizenship, Amerasians who could prove they were mixed-race—determined simply by physical appearance—were offered a special immigration status rather than American citizenship.<sup>49</sup> The U.S. government wanted the credit and emotional experience that came with helping this group of people, but they also had racially-based fears about what would happen if they provided laws that actually helped the Amerasians. Specifically, both President Carter and Reagan's administrations feared “fraudulent activities [on the part of Amerasians] and an uncontrollable mass migration.”<sup>50</sup> The laws therefore included certain restrictions designed to stunt their potential efficacy as far as benefiting Amerasians while still making the U.S. look good. These included “restrictions on countries and dates [of birth] (1 January 1950 to 1 October 1982), emphasis on sponsorship, [requiring] mother to give up parental rights, and only [allowing] for immigration as a ‘special immigrant,’ not as a citizen.”<sup>51</sup> The laws also did not discuss or address ways to help Amerasians determine or verify American paternity, thereby circumventing the opportunity for them to be granted full citizenship.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Sue-Je Lee Gage, “The Amerasian Problem: Blood, Duty, and Race,” *International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2007): 62.  
<http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=24305369&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>50</sup> Gage, “The Amerasian Problem,” 96.

<sup>51</sup> Gage, “The Amerasian Problem,” 97.

<sup>52</sup> Gage, “The Amerasian Problem,” 97.

Despite the nature of these laws, many Amerasians were able to take advantage them. Even then, however, the success of the laws is questionable. According to Clark, “Some half American children were allowed to come to America but that was pretty miserable. They had missed out on a life of education; I don’t think the program was successful. The U.S. government sent them to sponsors but these kids were tough from years of being mistreated on the streets.”<sup>53</sup> The experiences of the Amerasians and other Vietnamese children brought to the U.S. by way of the Amerasian laws or Operation Babylift vary widely. Some validate the very arguments and logic employed by adoptive American parents and people like Clark and Taylor. Others had experiences that demonstrated the long-lasting repercussions of the United States’ exercises in attempting to be white saviors.

### **The Adoptees Today**

Those Vietnamese children brought to the U.S. were generally welcomed and given lives and opportunities they otherwise might not have had. As adults, many of them confirm that they lead happy, productive lives. Amy Mai Tierney was born in November 1974, adopted at Christmas, and came to the U.S. on the second Operation Babylift flight.<sup>54</sup> Though she grew up in the States, Tierney ensured that Vietnamese culture would be a part of her life. During her junior year of college, she returned to Vietnam to attend the School for International Training in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), and to search for her parents.<sup>55</sup> “After college I took two years of language classes,” Tierney says. “Now with my children we study Vietnam for their

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<sup>53</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Amy Mai Tierney, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Amy Mai Tierney, interview.

ancestor projects and we celebrate Tet every year. We also eat Vietnamese food often.”<sup>56</sup> Tierney is far from alone in that life in the United States worked out well for her.

Jessica Stevens, another adoptee, has a somewhat different view—one which fits within Clark’s and Taylor’s narratives. She was six months old when Operation Babylift brought her to the U.S. where she grew up in an “all-white town.”<sup>57</sup> Unlike Amy, Jessica has had no interest in visiting Vietnam or trying to find her birth family.<sup>58</sup> When asked what she thought her life would be like had she stayed in Vietnam, she replied, “Honestly, I imagine I would be dead.” Now an adoptive mother herself, Jessica is grateful for what happened to her, describing herself as “content.”<sup>59</sup> “I know a lot of adoptees who have had [opportunities] and lives that would never have happened had they stayed [in Vietnam],” she shares. “All of the adoptees that I know have something in common about their Operation Babylift experience—we got a chance at life.”<sup>60</sup> However, not all adoptees feel the same way as Amy and Jessica do.

Bert Ballard expressed his gratitude for being brought to the United States through Operation Babylift, but he also had some qualms with the way Westerners like Clark and Taylor handled the situation.<sup>61</sup> For one thing, Ballard shared that “There was a lot of ‘objectifying’ or ‘commodifying’ of the children, as opposed to them being real human beings.”<sup>62</sup> This is not only true of the Westerners in Vietnam, but also of many Americans who adopted these children because it was trendy and made them feel good. When it came to the execution of Operation

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<sup>56</sup> Amy Mai Tierney, interview.

<sup>57</sup> Jessica Stevens, interview by Jonathan Thompson, November 27, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> Jessica Stevens, interview.

<sup>59</sup> Jessica Stevens, interview by Jonathan Thompson, November 27, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Jessica Stevens, interview.

<sup>61</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>62</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

Babylift itself, Ballard understood that it was a difficult time for Westerners and other caregivers to undertake such a drastic evacuation in the face of war.<sup>63</sup> He even expressed affection for those who had helped get him into the U.S.<sup>64</sup> However, he also believes the haphazard way the operation was executed, and the ensuing ramifications were avoidable. He argues, “There was this conscious choice: ‘Okay, we’re just going to evacuate these children and we’re going to feel good about what’s going on. We don’t really care about their past or anything else that was happening.’”<sup>65</sup> Ballard’s assessment of the choices made by those like Clark and Taylor further demonstrates the desire white saviors have for an emotional experience and the reckless, self-approved ways in which they will try to achieve it.

While many adoptees thrived in their new country and culture, others struggled and suffered. According to Sachs, “There were disrupted adoptions, kids shuttled from foster family to foster family, and cases of sexual abuse.”<sup>66</sup> Compared to other Vietnamese children brought to the U.S., Amerasians “reported more present use of alcohol and continued to suffer more symptoms of trauma and depression...”<sup>67</sup> As adults, many of the adoptees have also struggled with the ideology behind how they arrived in the United States and the legacy of Operation Babylift that overshadows them. Kevin Minh Allen notes that, like himself, others brought over as part of the operation had a sense of self-hatred instilled in them.<sup>68</sup> He also stated they had been

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<sup>63</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>64</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>65</sup> Sachs, *The Life We Were Given*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>66</sup> Dana Sachs, *The Life We Were Given: Operation Babylift, International Adoption, and the Children of War in Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

<sup>67</sup> Robert S. McKelvey, *The Dust of Life: America's Children Abandoned in Vietnam* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1999), 69.

<sup>68</sup> Kevin Minh Allen, “OPERATION BABY LIFT: An Adoptee's Perspective,” *The Humanist*, April 15, 2009, accessed December 21, 2018, <https://thehumanist.com/magazine/may-june-2009/features/operation-baby-lift-an-adoptees-perspective>.

forced to take loyalty tests “in order to prove [their] legitimacy in the eyes of [their] fellow Americans.”<sup>69</sup> Merging into another culture presented these individuals with a variety of internalized, long-term struggles, the likes of which Clark admitted “didn’t factor in for me, it wasn’t even a topic [or] something I could think of.”<sup>70</sup> Not only were these children’s lives drastically changed by the desires of white saviors, but once in the United States, they grew up being relentlessly reminded of the gratitude they were—and continue to be—expected to have for being “saved” from Vietnam. According to Allen:

Presidents, senators, congressmen, adoption agency directors, nurses, and flight attendants claim they were only trying to help us out of the mass grave that would have been our lives if they had left us in Vietnam. They’re at ease reminding us that it was they who came to our rescue while our countrymen were too busy gambling our country’s future away at the rigged roulette wheel; they’re only too happy to remind us that we were wearing rags before they picked us out of the trash heap and fit us with the rich fabric of freedom.<sup>71</sup>

The experiences that Allen has had in being reminded of what he owes the United States and those who saved him is also a reminder of the seemingly insatiable needs of white saviors.

As a nation, the U.S. adopted these children to provide themselves with an emotionally rewarding experience during a difficult time, a move many deem as “the one good thing that came out of the war.”<sup>72</sup> Their emotional need to be recognized and appreciated as white saviors, as well as to continue validating their privilege and cultural exceptionalism, did not end there, as Allen points out. For many Americans and some Vietnamese, Operation Babylift may have

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<sup>69</sup> Allen, “An Adoptee’s Perspective.”

<sup>70</sup> Cherie Clark, interview by Jonathan Thompson, December 11 and 19, 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Kevin Minh Allen, “OPERATION BABY LIFT: An Adoptee’s Perspective,” *The Humanist*, April 15, 2009, accessed December 21, 2018, <https://thehumanist.com/magazine/may-june-2009/features/operation-baby-lift-an-adoptees-perspective>.

<sup>72</sup> Allen, “An Adoptee’s Perspective.”



dissipated from memory, but for many others like Allen, the event and those tied to it continue to inform some aspects of their lives.

### **Operation Babylift in the Vietnamese and American Psyches Today**

Today in Vietnam, chiến dịch babylift, “the Babylift Campaign,” is a topic that as with much of the war lives in the past. Many young Vietnamese, like Huy Le Nguyen, know nothing about it. Nguyen, a university student in Hanoi, had never heard of Operation Babylift until going abroad.<sup>73</sup> “I [got] a little knowledge about this during the time I was in Denmark and studied about [the] U.S. In our history subject when I was at school, we did not have it. Therefore, I assume that our government does not want to mention it to our children. Or because we are in the North, so we don’t know it.”<sup>74</sup> Older generations, however, still remember.

A 2018 article in the *VnExpress International*, a digital Vietnamese newspaper, featured Nguyen Thi Dep, a 70-year-old woman still searching for her Amerasian daughter, Mai, whom she sent to the U.S. in 1975. “When I gave her away, I also gave her birth certificate and a photo of me and her hoping she could find her biological mother using those,” she told *VN Express*.<sup>75</sup> Despite reaching out to the U.S. consulate, contacting U.S. diplomats, and even writing to the president of the United States, Dep, like many others in her position, has not found any leads.

After almost forty-four years, parents like Dep, and many of the children, now adults, whose lives were affected by Operation Babylift continue to wrestle with the outcomes of the event. Outside the memories of those directly involved and the scholars who continue to debate

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<sup>73</sup> Huy Le Nguyen, email message to Jonathan Thompson, November 25, 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Huy Le Nguyen, email message to Jonathan Thompson, November 25, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Phan Than, “Woman Still Pines for Child She Sent to US 43 Years Ago,” *VnExpress International*, November 10, 2018, accessed December 17, 2018, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/travel-life/woman-still-pines-for-child-she-sent-to-us-43-years-ago-3836201.html>.

the event, Operation Babylift continues to fade from both Vietnam and America's collective consciousness. The driving force behind the operation—the white savior complex— continues to thrive in the U.S., however, and occasionally Operation Babylift is used to further validate it.

In the U.S., Operation Babylift has largely found a place in the back of most of America's memory. However, it occasionally comes up in books, movies, and television. Memoirs like Rosemary Taylor's *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (1988) and Cherie Clark's *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (2000) were released well after the event, serving as reminders in the 80s and 00s.<sup>76 77</sup> Other memoirs also came out decades after the operation including Shirley Peck-Barnes's *The War Cradle: Vietnam's Children of War* (2000).<sup>78</sup> Peck-Barnes's work is unique in that it not only fosters the same ideas as Clark's and Taylor's books, but its listing on Amazon served as a platform that further exemplified the white savior mentality that was behind both her book and Operation Babylift. In the customer review section, an individual using the name "Proud Vietnamese" left the following comment:

I am a Vietnamese [adoptee] and have no doubt that Ms. Peck-[Barnes'] story of what took place in Denver at the Continental Care Center is accurate. However, how can a woman who never stepped foot in Vietnam until 2005 know what happened over there [?] Her sources at best are shaky and some of the people who are mentioned in her book are not alive to defend themselves or lend their opinions to her. [...] Read the book if you must then investigate all of the other people who cared for us in Vietnam, then talk to us [and] see how we feel.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Rosemary Taylor, *Orphans of War: Work with the Abandoned Children of Vietnam, 1967–1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).

<sup>77</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000).

<sup>78</sup> Shirley Peck-Barnes, *The War Cradle: The Untold Story of Operation Babylift* (Denver: Vintage Pressworks, 2000).

<sup>79</sup> "Customer Review: Not True But Not False," Amazon, accessed December 23, 2018, [https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R31IP9UVZJ8EJK/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_d\\_rvw\\_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0970688407](https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R31IP9UVZJ8EJK/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0970688407).

Peck-Barnes responded personally to the adoptee’s review where she demonstrated not only her original need for emotional reward and gratitude for her efforts, but also as Allen previously discussed, how white saviors continue demanding those rewards from adoptees today:

This review has set the adoptee's cause back thirty years. For shame, when so much effort has gone into your story being the “voice” for the children of war TODAY. The writer is obviously someone who has either been on the trip or was not selected. The number on the manifest was set by World [Airways]... I only did what was requested of me and am sorry that this has reached a public posting level. I want to express my thanks for those of you who took the time to come and speak to me during those exciting/busy few days of [Operation] Homeward Bound, and appreciate my part in its conception[...] and more importantly, for those who sent me a note afterwards.

I am not discouraged by the writer of “Proud Vietnamese” and will continue my efforts in speaking for the children of war. I have but one question for such critics[...] “Where is your book?” Had they read *The War Cradle*, it was revealed that I spent several years in that part of the world during Korea and have first-hand knowledge of war and children. It is a common fact that most non-fiction writers have not been through the experience of which they write...but are objective to bring the facts and story to light.

To the writer of “Proud Vietnamese,” you have my utmost sympathy regarding your slanting views and have discredited your [comrades] by revealing yourself in such a public venue. [...] If you [...] were on the trip, a simple “thank you” would have been enough and would have recognized it for what it was[...] a gift of a lifetime. I am sorry it was not placed in that perspective and that you felt it necessary to discredit me [publicly].

As for the monetary gains, there are none. I have never been paid a royalty and have given more books away than sold[...] Until now, I thought it was all worth it. You have placed another perspective on my thirty years [of] [involvement] and now place the question that perhaps it was all for “naught.” I think not[...] and hopefully, your counterparts will agree. Thanks to those who have been supportive. Pocks to those who have not.

Best regards, Shirley<sup>80</sup>

The desire for praise and the strongly conditional nature behind Peck-Barnes’s efforts associated with Operation Babylift demonstrate the direct correlation between the underlying motivations of

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<sup>80</sup> “Customer Review: Shirley's Response to ‘Proud Vietnamese,’” Amazon, accessed December 23, 2018, [https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R3S7KH9MP056T4/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_d\\_rvw\\_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0970688407](https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R3S7KH9MP056T4/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0970688407).

white saviors and the help they are willing to give. The value she placed on her efforts as a savior were not based on the wellbeing and safety of the children, but rather on the expected validation and unyielding gratitude she felt she deserved for participating in the event, even from a distance. The idea that one adoptee questioned her validity as a white savior was enough to have her publicly call into question whether her actions in helping others was worth it at all. Though other conversations surrounding Operation Babylift are much less overt, the underlying expectations of emotional validation and reward are consistent.

Recent years have also seen books geared toward children and young adults that focus on Operation Babylift while also subconsciously helping to foster the white savior complex in Western youth. The second book in Marjorie Huan's children's book series *The Heroes of the Vietnam War, Saving the Vietnamese Orphans* (2012) and Andrea Warren's young adult novel *Escape from Saigon: How a Vietnam War Orphan Became an American Boy* both continue to server as points of access for young white children to learn about Operation Babylift while also continuing to observe and internalize the white savior complex mentality.<sup>81 82</sup>

While these texts demonstrate how the mentality that helped create Operation Babylift continues to thrive today, one children's cartoon show uniquely exemplified not only how white Americans see Operation Babylift, but how the savior mentality can be passed on, encouraged, and celebrated through television.

### **“Arnold’s Christmas”: Promoting the White Savior Complex in Children Today**

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<sup>81</sup> Marjorie Haun, *Saving the Vietnamese Orphans: The Heroes of the Vietnam War: Book Two* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012).

<sup>82</sup> Andrea Warren, *Escape from Saigon: How a Vietnam War Orphan Became an American Boy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

On December 11, 1996, Nickelodeon aired “Arnold’s Christmas,” an episode of the animated series *Hey Arnold!*, which many consider to be the most emotionally powerful episode of the series.<sup>83</sup> Incidentally, this acclaimed and beloved episode is also an exercise in subversively praising and promoting the white savior complex while reflecting on Operation Babylift. In the episode, Arnold, a fourth grader who lives in a boarding house in New York City, participates in the building’s Secret Santa gift exchange where he draws Mr. Hyunh’s name. Though the episode does not directly mention Southeast Asia or the Vietnam War, the episode establishes that Mr. Hyunh came to the U.S. as a refugee twenty years after the communist victory. However, during the fall of Saigon, Mr. Hyunh’s infant daughter, Mai, was selected at the last minute to be airlifted out of South Vietnam by a white U.S. military soldier. As the helicopter took off, the soldier yelled out that he would take Mai to New York City. After finally arriving in New York City himself, Mr. Hyunh failed to find his daughter. He shares this story with Arnold in a flashback as Arnold seeks to get clues for a gift to get him.<sup>84</sup> Herein lies one part of the episode’s white Western self-praise for the actions that had been taken in Vietnam twenty-one years prior.

In Mr. Hyunh’s flashback, the simplified version of the last chapter of the Vietnam War presents a clear narrative where the Vietnamese are victims and the Americans are the saviors. For those viewers old enough to understand this was an Operation Babylift flashback, it reinforced the oversimplified “‘better dead than Red’ mentality that reduced the complexities of

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<sup>83</sup> Nina Mohan, “For Everyone Who Has A Lot Of Feelings About The ‘Hey Arnold’ Christmas Special,” BuzzFeed, accessed February 05, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/ninamohan/psa-hey-arnold-has-the-best-christmas-episode-of-all-time>.

<sup>84</sup> “The Heartwarming Story of Mr. Hyunh's Daughter (Hey Arnold!),” YouTube video, 04:18. Posted by “Nick Animation,” May 20, 2018. <https://youtu.be/3Ok--WYeBdc>.

the world down to simple black-and-white choices.” For the children watching out of historical context, it was an example that glorified and perpetuated the white savior mentality. The episode shows how white people, as children, are taught “implicitly or explicitly (or both) that [white people] possess the answers and skills needed to rescue others, no matter the situation” and that “saving others is the burden they must bear.”<sup>85</sup> The flashback, however, is just one of the two layers of white savior mentality promotion the episode offers.

The second way that the episode celebrates and reinforces the white Western cultural underpinning that is the white savior mentality is demonstrated in how Arnold and his friends respond to the situation with Mr. Hyunh. After going to Mr. Hyunh to get gift ideas and then learning about the situation involving Mai, Arnold decides that he will reunite the two. Emboldened by a desire to help others, he sets out on his mission with good intentions. However, his actions are a direct result of his inherent belief that he, as a white male American child, is capable of “saving” Mr. Huynh in a sense by doing in one night what Mr. Hyunh, a person of color, could not accomplish himself despite several years of trying. Not only does Arnold embody the prototypical savior mentality, but he is somewhat successful in achieving his goal.

Despite his efforts, Arnold himself does not locate Mai. However, his classmate, Helga, who has a crush on him, manages to do so. Like Arnold, who attempted to find Mai so he could benefit from the emotional satisfaction of making a non-white person happy by providing them with something they themselves could not attain, Helga found Mai solely for the emotional reward of making Arnold happy, perhaps someday earning his affection because of it. In her endeavor, Helga can only get the information she needs from a government records archivist by

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<sup>85</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

trading a pair of coveted boots she received as an early Christmas gift. At first the archivist declines, citing the late hour on a holiday, but Helga convinces him to do it so that Arnold will believe in Christmas miracles. By this point, reuniting Mr. Huynh and Mai is being done entirely for the benefit of a white girl. The needs of the non-white people involved are no longer part of the equation.

In the end, the episode confirms the validity of the white savior complex by demonstrating that because the white Western children decided to help, everything worked out, and they were rewarded. Mai and Mr. Huynh are reunited, but that is not the highlight for Arnold or Helga. Arnold does not know that Helga was involved, but he nevertheless benefits through having his goal achieved, earning Mai and Mr. Huynh's gratitude, and having his belief in Christmas miracles return. Helga, uninterested in the actual reunion of Mai and Mr. Huynh, simply used the negative situation the two people of color were in to her benefit. Despite not getting credit from them, she was still rewarded through seeing Arnold experience the outcome he desired and also begin to embrace the idea of miracles.

This episode is not only reflective of the white savior complex and its role in Operation Babylift, but it reinforces the savior mentality for children in an episode that is essentially a celebration of itself. This episode, then, has helped perpetuate the underlying notions white Americans have regarding racial and cultural superiority as well as their responsibility to help or save non-white people and be rewarded for it. These concepts then continue to be reflected and validated in different ways throughout Western culture as the children become adults.

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The end of the Vietnam war saw the United States turn its back on Vietnam and the South Vietnamese and Amerasians it had abandoned there. In the years that followed, Westerners who had exercised the white savior complex in Vietnam and during Operation Babylift continued to validate their actions, which some, like Cherie Clark, continue to do today, despite the Vietnamese proving Americans wrong after their withdrawal.

Not only did the narrative about Amerasians being massacred fail to come to fruition, but the claims that no one would pick up where Westerners left off in the orphanages proved completely false. In ways that many Americans continue to deny today, the Vietnamese, though struggling in the wake of war, managed to hold their own, just as they had done for thousands of years before Western intervention. However, the nation as a whole, and specifically the Amerasians, did suffer for many years.

Several years after the war ended, the U.S. began opening its arms to the Amerasians, again in the role of a nation of saviors. The Amerasian Act of 1982 and the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1988 sought to help those the U.S. left behind, but more specifically, it sought to alleviate American guilt and reward Westerners with the belief that they were doing something good. Like the children brought over through Operation Babylift, many Amerasians benefited from these laws, but others did not. For both groups, life in the U.S was a mixture of good experiences that seemingly validated Clark's and Taylor's expectations and negative experiences that further illustrated some of the more dire consequences of actions taken by white saviors for their own benefit.

Many adoptees struggle with the awareness that even today, white saviors in the U.S. demand praise and recognition for saving them while overlooking the ramifications of their



actions. The inherent, fundamental concepts of responsibility for saving non-white people while enjoying the emotional rewards that they are entitled to by virtue of privilege continue to thrive in Western culture today. Through a variety of mediums, including books and television programs geared towards adults and children alike, the white savior mentality responsible for events like Operation Babylift continue to be ingrained in American and Western culture today.

## Conclusion

The white savior complex played a key role in both executing Operation Babylift as well as creating the need for it through years of American intervention in Vietnam. By applying Teju Cole's White Savior Industrial Complex framework and Jordan Flaherty's and Caitlin Breedlove's savior mentality concepts to Operation Babylift, the Western cultural underpinnings that informed the actions of the U.S. can be more clearly understood. Applying these concepts to the individuals involved, including Cherie Clark and Rosemary Taylor, further underscores the motivations and outcomes, both negative and positive, that can result from taking on the role of a white savior. Specifically, the actions of these women, as well as many American adoptive parents and members of government, illustrate the dangers and long-term consequences of attempting to save non-white people without understanding or acknowledging the role of privilege or the white savior mentality. Privilege has historically enabled white people to act on what they believed to be right. Western culture has also instilled in white people an unwavering sense of duty to save non-white people as well as a clear belief that they are culturally superior and inherently able to solve any problem. These concepts result in Westerners taking actions to "save" others in ways that directly benefit them, despite the consequences for the non-white people involved. Operation Babylift, when viewed through the white savior lens, demonstrates just that.

Born out of the earlier Western concepts of the white man's burden and American exceptionalism, the idea of the white savior complex and its effects on non-white people is one that many Westerners struggle to understand. It can be difficult to identify as an underlying if

not entirely subconscious cultural trait. It is also new enough that it has not been widely used as a lens for reassessing historical events in which it played a direct role, like Operation Babylift.

Applying this lens to this event demonstrates that it played a role in making Operation Babylift possible. It also presents new understandings of American actions, Vietnamese responses, and how the event is still relevant and reflective of American motives and actions in the international arena today. The airlift is also one of many past events facilitated by Western white culture that when viewed through this lens, demonstrates the systemic and long-term repercussions faced by foreign groups as the result of “help” from white people. It exemplifies what happens when white Westerners act but do not acknowledge the role of the white savior complex or their true motivations. Understanding the role of this concept in this historical context will exemplify and encourage the need for white Westerners to be more mindful and intentional in their efforts to assist non-white people.

Asking white Westerners to evaluate the role that their race, privilege, and culture plays in their desire to help non-white people—as well as the potential consequences for doing so—is not meant to suggest that white people should not help others at all. Asking white Westerners to understand the role of the white savior complex is to ask them to make informed, mindful choices. For most Westerners, there lies before them a world filled with people in need, which they respond to with genuine feelings of wanting to help. Most people also experience frustration, feeling that there is little they can do to stop or alleviate the negative situations plaguing others. There is, however, another feeling many white Westerners feel: desire for “the high and passion and urgency and realness of what marginalized people need to do to thrive and

survive...”<sup>1</sup> According to Breedlove, this desire “leads to cultural appropriation and insensitivity. The well-intentioned are always reaching out. ‘What is your culture? Tell me about all your inner pain.’ It’s forced intimacy. It’s not wanting to turn the reporting back on yourself.”<sup>2</sup> Cherie Clark is one example of a white American who demonstrated these feelings of desire. Seeking a sense of purpose, she relocated to Vietnam, where she experienced a form of intimacy through helping those who suffered, while neglecting to see the larger role that she, as an American, played in creating the problem she was trying to solve.<sup>3</sup> Along with other white saviors like Taylor, Wendy Grant, and Ed Daly, Clark’s self-assigned role as a savior in Vietnam later manifested in the disorganized evacuation of Vietnamese children, resulting in instances of death, alleged kidnapping, and lost identities. Now as Westerners come to understand the white savior complex, there is also the opportunity to learn how to check it.

Before a white Westerner asks how they can help others, be it those in Haiti struggling after an earthquake or South Vietnamese children suffering in a war zone, they must ask themselves difficult, but telling questions. Breedlove asks of white people, “How can you ask yourself a different set of questions? What’s missing for you? Why are you trying to help everyone else? What are the actions for social justice and movement building that don’t center you as a protagonist?”<sup>4</sup> For many white Westerners, the world is, as Cole stated, “nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm...”<sup>5</sup> In order to be of true help to non-white people, white

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<sup>1</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Flaherty, *No More Heroes*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Cherie Clark, *After Sorrow Comes Joy: One Woman's Struggle to Bring Hope to Thousands of Children in Vietnam and India* (Westminster, CO: Lawrence and Thomas, 2000), 213.

<sup>4</sup> Flaherty, *No More Heroes*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

Westerners must be able to identify their own needs that they are trying to meet in the process. They must decenter themselves, a process that, once the need for is recognized, can be difficult to achieve.

White people are born into privilege, which throughout their life they come to see as the natural order of things.<sup>6</sup> Taylor demonstrated this mentality in her descriptions of the Vietnamese as incapable of caring for or raising children.<sup>7</sup> It is not that they were incapable; it is that they did not raise children by Western standards. For Taylor, born of white privilege, their ways simply translated as wrong. To help avoid this, white saviors must step outside of their privilege, which can feel unnatural, “but it’s a crucial step to challenging systems of inequality.”<sup>8</sup> To avoid negative and harmful outcomes in helping others, it is necessary for white people to not only ask themselves the right questions, but to understand their privilege and motivations, to step outside their privilege, to make those they are helping the center of their efforts, and to understand the relationship between their own culture and the needs of the culture they are trying to meet. By asking the right questions and identifying the underpinnings of white Western culture that promote cultural superiority, the need to be visible as a savior, and the expectations for reward and praise, white people can determine how to be real allies rather than a saviors.<sup>9</sup>

Operation Babylift also illustrated that the ability of white saviors to understand the root cause of the problems they set out to solve is necessary to avoid doing more harm than good. For the white savior, their “good heart does not always allow [them] to think constellationally. [They

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<sup>6</sup> Jordan Flaherty, *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), Kindle Edition.

<sup>7</sup> Flaherty, *No More Heroes*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>8</sup> Flaherty, *No More Heroes*, Kindle Edition.

<sup>9</sup> Flaherty, *No More Heroes*, Kindle Edition.

do] not connect the dots or see the patterns of power behind the isolated ‘disasters.’ All [they see] is need, and [they see] no need to reason out the need for the need.”<sup>10</sup> Such was the case for the many white saviors who took up posts in South Vietnam’s orphanages. Though they were certainly aware of the war going on around them that produced orphans, they were less aware of—and less concerned with stopping—the other, larger patterns that orphaned so many children. The U.S. military created orphans through massacring, rape, creating “free fire zones,” and abandoning the Amerasian born out of prostitution.<sup>11 12 13</sup> Rather than work towards recognizing and addressing these systemic problems, the white savior course of action was to relocate as many children to the United States as possible. This solution was a demonstration of the white saviors’ privilege and ability to “save,” and it also provided them with a sense of cultural superiority and the emotional satisfaction of doing a good deed. For this reason, Cole says, “I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.”<sup>14</sup> To engage in white savior behavior in another culture, Westerners must understand and address the systemic issues that create the need they seek to solve. In the case of the Vietnam War and Operation Babylift, Americans, over two decades, created the very problems in Vietnam that they would later step in to as saviors to address.

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<sup>10</sup> Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 444.

<sup>12</sup> Kiernan, *Việt Nam*, 445.

<sup>13</sup> Trin Yarborough, *Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 19,

[http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_Cover](http://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=211779&site=eds-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_Cover).

<sup>14</sup> Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex.”

The findings from applying the white savior complex to Operation Babylift illustrate the emotional needs, privilege, and cultural and racial views inherent to white people that made possible, for their benefit, the cultural displacement of Vietnamese children under the guise of humanitarianism. These results reinforce the importance of teaching white Westerners that if they want to help others, they should “first, own up to the motives that drive philanthropic interventions, so that personal catharsis does not subsume the real need of others. Second, consider the structural underpinnings and historical legacies that together sustain the very infrastructure of the problems that captivate our activist hearts.”<sup>15</sup> To truly help others, a Westerner does not need to be able to effect drastic change. They need to decenter themselves, evaluate their motivations, intentions, and cultural understandings, ask those they seek to help how they can help, and put the focus on the non-white people involved, giving them agency, rather than seeking out emotional rewards. As so many Westerners involved in Operation Babylift exemplified, to do otherwise serves to perpetuate the white savior complex, benefiting only the white person while doing more harm to others than good.

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<sup>15</sup> Heather Laine Talley, *Saving Face: Disfigurement and the Politics of Appearance* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 128-129.

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