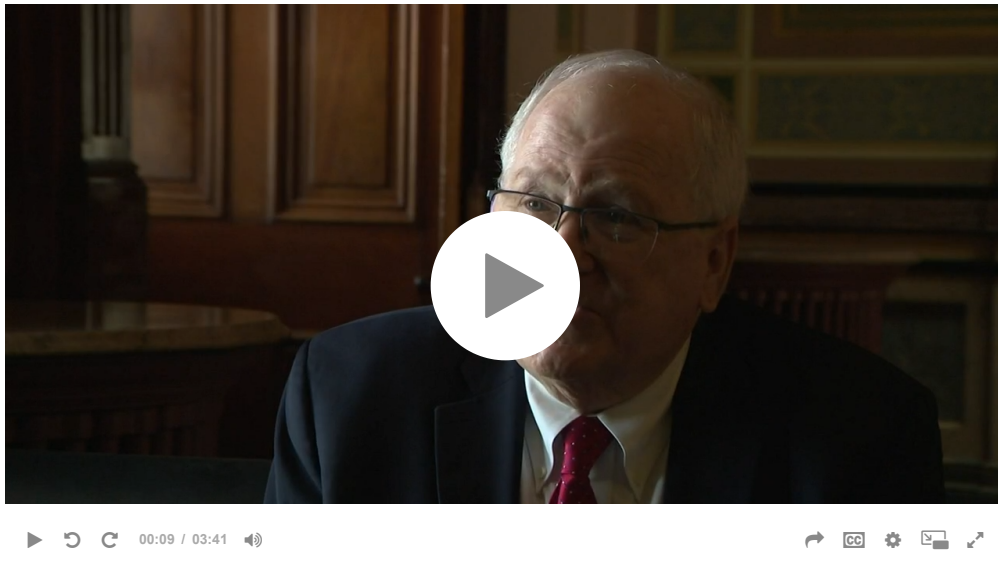


Refugee Impact: Where does Iowa's history begin?

Former Ambassador Kenneth Quinn had a front-seat row to the beginning of Iowa's leadership in welcoming refugees.



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DES MOINES, Iowa — Kenneth Quinn has worn a lot of hats throughout his career. But one of the most cherished is when he worked in the former Gov. Robert Ray administration in the 1970s and 1980s.

It was in 1979 when Iowa began its journey as the leader in accepting refugees from Asian countries. Quinn said Tai Dam refugees wrote to every governor, asking to come to their state but remain together. Ray answered that call.

Quinn said Ray convinced then-President Gerald Ford to let Iowa have all of the Tai Dam refugees.

"And they came here, and they've been here ever since," said Quinn. "And their culture was kept intact."

But Ray's acceptance of refugees didn't stop there.

Quinn said on a cold January night in 1979, Ray was watching a news report about Vietnamese refugees, called boat people, who were escaping out of the country on frail boats, searching for a place that would take them.

"He watched a news report of seeing boat people refugees being pushed back out to sea...and nobody would take them. And you watch this boat break up, and refugees falling into the ocean into the waves and drowning before your eyes," said Quinn.

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Ray was so moved by the images that he wrote to then-President Jimmy Carter that night, asking Carter to reopen America's borders to these refugees. Ray promised to double the number of refugees Iowa would take.

"And Carter agreed," said Quinn.

Quinn said he and Ray went to a summit with the United Nations that summer and received a standing ovation for pledging to open America's borders to more refugees.

"It was really just amazing, and Ray was instrumental in that," said Quinn.

Robert D. Ray died in July 2018.

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