

IOWA VIEW

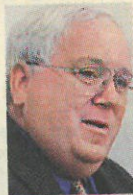
Ford's best legacy? Successful Indochinese refugees

I was sorry that I did not have the chance to go to Washington or Grand Rapids to say goodbye to Jerry Ford, especially since I was one of the first people to offer him words of encouragement as he was about to assume the presidency on Aug. 9, 1974.

It happened like this: My office at the National Security Council at the White House was in the Old Executive Office Building, one floor above the vice president's office. As the time for Ford's swearing in drew near, a colleague and I went to the elevator to go downstairs to see if we might catch a glimpse of the president-to-be as he made his way to the East Wing. We boarded the tiny elevator on the third floor, but were surprised when it stopped abruptly one floor down. As the doors opened, standing there were vice president and Mrs. Ford, a Marine holding the Bible on which he would take the oath of office and two burly Secret Service agents.

We immediately offered to get off the elevator so that the presidential party could have it. Ever the nice guy, Ford instinctively said, "No, we can all ride down together." So the two of us were squeezed in. As we neared the first floor, I thought it appropriate to offer some word of encouragement, and so with enormous originality, I blurted out, "Good luck, Mr. President." Jerry Ford turned to look at me and said a simple, "Thank you."

It was the beginning of a historic journey. For the past week, editorial pages and television news shows have been filled with postulations about which actions and achievements of President



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Ford's will be most remembered: the Nixon pardon; being the only non-elected chief executive; bringing the country back together after the divisiveness of Watergate and Vietnam. I think they all got it wrong.

I would suggest that President Ford's most enduring legacy can be found in almost every city and town in America in the person of the more than 130,000 refugees he brought to this country immediately after the fall of Saigon, as well as the million other Indochinese refugees who followed in the next decade.

These refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have enriched the United States in an array of areas, achieving high standards in education and demonstrating a committed work ethic. Almost none of them would have gotten here except for the good-hearted and caring Gerald Ford.

There was considerable opposition, even among the president's senior advisers, to bringing large numbers of Asian refugees to America. It would be enough, the argument went, to just take care of the top generals and South Vietnamese leaders. Ford disagreed. He lashed out at such attitudes, saying: "It just burns me up. We didn't do that to the Hungarians. We didn't do it to the Cubans. Damn it, we are not going to do it now."

Jerry Ford had an instinctive trust that thousands and thousands of average Americans would open their homes and hearts to receive these unfortunate people who were at such risk. And his faith was rewarded across the country, including in Iowa, where the president approved Gov. Robert Ray's request to allow all ethnic Tai Dam refugees from Laos to resettle in this state.

Gerald Ford redefined the American attitude toward racially diverse refugees and launched what arguably became the single greatest international humanitarian endeavor since the Marshall Plan — an effort that resulted in more than 1.5 million refugees finding new homes in the United States, Canada, France and Australia.

These refugees from Indochina, their children and grandchildren live in freedom today, thanks to Gerald Ford's concern for the suffering of "little people" with no one else to help them.

KENNETH QUINN, president of the World Food Prize Foundation, was in the U.S. Foreign Service for 32 years and served as ambassador to Cambodia.