



August 20, 2007

The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We are writing to convey our strongest possible support for your presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to former Governor Robert D. Ray of Iowa.

We all have been greatly moved, Mr. President, by the passion you have exhibited whenever you have spoken of the yearning of people all around the world to live in freedom. It is indeed one of the strongest and most basic human aspirations.

As you will see from the enclosed nomination, Governor Ray was instrumental in helping hundreds of thousands of such people – refugees from Indochina desperately seeking to live free – to build new lives in America in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War. In 1979 he led the effort in America to rescue the “Boat People,” individuals who were dying in large numbers as they desperately tried to escape from the new Communist regime in Vietnam on small, frail river craft that were not fit for a journey across the South China Sea.

Later that year, Governor Ray repeated his great moral leadership, this time sending food and medicine to thousands of starving Cambodian refugees fleeing the genocidal Khmer Rouge.

As a result of his compassion and exceptional efforts, thousands of lives were saved and thousands upon thousands of refugees are alive and living in freedom in America today.

Governor Ray’s extraordinary humanitarian leadership has never been formally recognized. He truly deserves to receive America’s highest honor for supporting freedom in the world. We urge you to act now to approve his receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Hon. Chuck Grassley
U.S. Senate

Hon. Terry E. Branstad
Governor of Iowa 1983 - 1999

Hon. Mary Kramer
U.S. Ambassador (ret.)

Hon. Chuck Larson
Former State Senator

Dr. Kenneth M. Quinn
U.S. Ambassador (ret.)

Nomination
of
Hon. Robert D. Ray
of
Iowa

for

The Presidential
Medal of Freedom

August 2007

Twenty five years ago, in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, Southeast Asia experienced incredible human suffering including two million Cambodians dead at the hands of the genocidal Khmer Rouge and hundreds of thousands of refugees from Indochina desperately clinging to life as they sought to escape oppressive regimes and build new lives in freedom.

Under the inspired humanitarian leadership of then Governor Robert D. Ray, Iowa responded to these refugee challenges, providing moral leadership to America and the world, and saving thousands and thousands of people, the great majority innocent women and children, from starvation and death and enabling them to build new lives in freedom.

Governor Ray provided extraordinary leadership on behalf of refugees from Indochina on three separate occasions.

The first came right after the fall of Saigon in 1975. By then, America had received over 130,000 refugees from who were to be resettled in every state in the union in order to ensure that no one area would have to bear the entire burden. At that time, the Tai Dam people, a distinct ethnic group from Laos, with their own language and culture, were fearful that, having just escaped from that country, they would be scattered all across the U.S. with their culture and family relationships broken apart.

Desperate to keep their customs and communal relationships intact, their leaders wrote a letter to every Governor in America, asking that they be accepted as a group and resettled together. Only one Governor replied—Robert Ray of Iowa. He wrote back that Iowa would welcome the Tai Dam as a people. Then the Governor set about getting the agreement of Washington agencies to approve that exception. Bob Ray's diligence paid off, and later in 1975, he was at the airport to welcome the Tai Dam to their new home in Iowa. They are still there 25 years later, their culture and language preserved. The children of these determined people have grown up in freedom and are contributing in meaningful ways to the new home.

Most people thought that after that first wave of refugees was resettled in America that the issue was over. The refugee program was closed down in the United States and every other country. But in 1978, hundreds and then thousands of Vietnamese began to escape from their country seeking new homes in which they could raise their children freedom. They took to the seas in very small, frail boats which were usually just meant for inland waterways, hoping to make it to one of the nearby countries which were hundreds of miles away.

These "Boat People" endured great dangers: Violent storms at sea; the breakdown of their boat's engine, leaving them to die from lack of food and water on the open seas; and marauding pirates who would rob them, rape the women and then perhaps murder them all to ensure there were no witnesses. For the lucky ones, who eventually made it to shore in another country, they faced the most heartbreaking consequence of all. Since no major countries were still accepting refugees for resettlement, local officials feared they would be inundated with new refugees they could not deal with.. And so these local officials began pushing the refugee boats back out to sea.

One cold Iowa evening in early 1979, Governor Robert Ray sat in his office and watched a television special featuring Ed Bradley, which captured this cruel reality. With the

camera rolling and Bradley describing the human horror befalling these innocent people, a large boat – having been just pushed back out into the ocean – broke apart in the pounding waves several hundred feet off shore. Screaming, dozens and dozens of refugees were pitched into the sea. The elderly and very small children were quickly pulled beneath the waves. Mothers desperately tried to save their children. Soon the survivors began to reach the beach only half alive. Bradley and his crew joined with others pulling half alive people up onto the shore.

After watching that incredible human tragedy, Governor Ray was deeply affected. Even though no one would look to him or his state as being responsible for action, the Governor said that we had two choices: We could turn our backs; or we could reach out a hand to these unfortunate people just seeking a touch of life. Governor Ray knew he had to do something. So he remained at his office late into the night, writing a letter to President Carter. In the morning he called a press conference and announced that, in order to save the Boat People he was pledging to double Iowa's intake of refugees if only the President would reopen the American Refugee Resettlement Program.

Standing in Des Moines that morning, Robert Ray was the first elected official, in any country anywhere, to commit to receiving the Boat People. His was an act of global moral leadership that would eventually be felt around the world.

At the 1979 National Governors' Association winter meeting, Governor Ray asked for special permission to address the plenary session, and made an impassioned plea for other governors to join him in rescuing the Boat People. Two other governors – one a Democrat from New Jersey, Brendan Byrne; the other Republican Bill Milliken from Michigan – joined with him in a bipartisan effort to support the administration on this issue. In July, Governor Ray traveled to the United Nations Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland to attend the U.N. Conference on the Boat People. At first there was much talk, but it seemed as though no country was prepared to do anything to alleviate this problem. But then the US announced we would reopen our borders and accept 168,000 new refugees a year. The Boat People were saved.

The entire audience of UN delegates spontaneously came to their feet cheering, cheering America's humanitarian leadership. Cheering an effort that had begun when one Governor watched a TV report and vowed he would try to make a difference. Sitting with the US delegation, Governor Ray said, "I've never been more proud to be an American than at this moment."

Three months later, Governor Ray welcomed Pope John Paul II to Iowa where his Holiness was greeted by some of the refugees and where the Pope told Iowans, "You are the stewards of the earth, with an obligation to feed all mankind."

Just one month later, the Pope's challenge to America would be tested. In November of that same year, Governor Ray encountered still another desperate situation, this time involving Cambodian refugees who were fleeing the genocidal Khmer Rouge. Governor and Mrs. Ray were taken to the Thai Cambodian border where they encountered a scene of human devastation with few parallels.

30,000 people deposited in the middle of an open field with only a few sheets of plastic to keep the monsoon rains off of them, and only the most meager food and medicine to try and keep them alive. From 50 to 100 people were dying each day, and were being buried in a large mass grave. Others were so stunned that they could not carry out even basic functions to keep themselves alive.

And this was but the tip of the iceberg of human misery, as there were 5 million more people inside Cambodia just as emaciated and devastated as the group that we saw.

There was no CNN then. So the pictures that Governor Ray brought back to Iowa were the only way that people in his state could learn what was going on. When Governor Ray arrived at the airport that night, an enterprising young reporter from the *Des Moines Register*, named David Yepsen came to the airport to interview the Governor. As he heard him recount the tales of human misery and unbelievable suffering, Yepsen realized there was a large story. He asked the Governor for his film, which the Governor gave him, and the next morning, on the front page of the *Des Moines Register*, people across the state read that Governor Ray had “watched people die.”

This quote and the governor's pictures were soon picked up by media across the state, and it produced an electric current of concern. The leaders of Iowa's three major religions sought an urgent meeting with the Governor, and in his office at the statehouse, Rabbi Jay Goldberg, Catholic Bishop Maurice Dingman and the Reverend Don Manworren of the Interfaith Forum pledged their united support behind any effort to save the suffering Cambodians. Michael Gartner, then Editor of the *Des Moines Register*, sent a message that the editorial pages of his paper would strongly support some urgent effort to respond to this human tragedy. And from this, Bob Ray formed Iowa SHARES [Iowa Sends Help to Aid Refugees and End Starvation]. It had no staff, other than a few individuals in the Governor's office. Simply a mailbox address, and a coupon appearing each day in the Register's editorial page, but soon carried by papers all across the state.

And then, organizations and businesses and schools and churches and synagogues all came forward to offer to spread the word among their members. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, almost \$600,000 flooded into the Iowa SHARES mailbox (that's the equivalent of about \$1.5 million today), and almost all of it came from small, individual contributions. This money enabled food and medicine to be rushed to the Cambodian border. And on Christmas Day 1979, the first convoy of Iowa SHARES food and medicine reached Cambodian refugees who only a few days earlier had been subsisting on snakes and insects. Food deliveries continued to other locations at the border and deep inside Cambodia in the following months, with special emphasis on feeding malnourished children.

As money flowed in to Iowa SHARES, there was also an urgent need for medical staff to go to the Cambodian border and provide life-sustaining care. Volunteer Iowa doctors and nurses were soon on their way to a makeshift hospital supported by Iowa Shares. They faced some of the most appalling and devastating medical problems imaginable. One volunteer physician said, “In four days, I saw more acute medicine than I will ever see again.” A second and then a third wave of volunteers were sent.

Over its two years of existence, Iowa SHARES fed and treated thousands and thousands of people, saving an untold number from starvation and death.

In October 2004, a few months before his death, Pope John Paul II received the new Catholic Bishop of Des Moines at the Vatican. The Bishop introduced himself to the frail Pontiff by reminding him that he had visited Iowa on his first trip to the United States. The Pope spoke very slowly and hesitatingly: He said, "Iowa.....Farms.....Refugees....."

The individual who was most responsible for putting the word "Refugees" on John Paul II's tongue that day, was the same man: who kept the Tai Dam intact as a people; offered the Vietnamese Boat People a haven when no one else would; and whose word caused a whole state to send food and medicine half way around the world to rescue starving Cambodians. Thousands and thousands are alive today and living in freedom thanks to Iowa Governor Robert D. Ray