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Carl J. Bon Tempo: Americans at the Gate

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INTRODUCTION

Americans at the Gate

IN THE 1930s, as Europeans fled—and attempted to flee—the horrors of Nazism, the United States closed its doors. The United States' failure to act as a sanctuary in the face of the most infamous refugee crisis in history makes the next sixty years all the more remarkable. In the decades after World War II, over 4 million refugees entered the United States. To be sure, those 4 million represented only a small percentage of the global refugee population, yet viewed from the perspective of the 1930s, they also represented a significant effort to admit and resettle some of the world's refugees.

Americans at the Gate explains how and why the United States admitted those refugees. While the United States' commitment to refugees certainly grew more capacious over the second half of the twentieth century—in terms of both the numbers admitted and their countries of origin—refugee admissions were by no means ever assured. Rather, Americans battled ferociously over the size, shape, and existence of refugee programs and laws. Opposition existed nationally and it bloomed regionally and locally, especially in places like Florida and California, which saw large influxes of newcomers after 1960. Likewise, refugee admissions rested upon a tricky and shifting calculus of American foreign policy concerns, domestic political and cultural considerations, the nation's economic health, the public's receptiveness toward immigrants, and the different ways Americans defined themselves as a nation. As a result, refugee affairs in the United States always have been a distinctly human enterprise, with successes and failures, with mistakes and misunderstandings, and with compassion and miserliness.

Refugees made up only part of the almost 28 million newcomers, the majority of whom were immigrants who legally entered the United States between 1945 and 2000.¹ A vital conceptual distinction differentiates refugees from immigrants, however. Refugees suffer from persecution (or the threat of persecution), which precludes them from returning to their homes or native countries. Immigrants are under no such threat, though they often leave their countries because of adverse political, economic, cultural, or social conditions. In more colloquial terms, refugees are chased out of their countries while immigrants choose to leave theirs. This difference has helped give refugee affairs in the post-World War II era

their own unique politics, policy development, cultural resonance, and relationship to foreign policy.

The histories of these two types of newcomers, though, most certainly overlapped. As this book shows, immigration politics and laws served as the backdrop to refugee affairs. The two blocs that contested immigration politics—restrictionists (who generally opposed the entry of immigrants) and liberalizers (who generally supported the entry of immigrants)—also frequently battled over the entry of refugees. Moreover, anti-immigrant sentiment was a persistent, but not overwhelming, presence on postwar America's political and cultural landscape. During these decades, between a third to a half of Americans supported reductions in the entry of immigrants; even greater numbers regularly opposed proposals that would make it easier for newcomers to enter the country. Refugees too felt the sting of this xenophobia. Many Americans felt threatened by the prospect of newly arrived refugees—often of religious, racial, and ethnonational groups poorly represented in the United States—moving into their neighborhoods, going to school with their children, or competing with them for jobs.

But immigration affairs, and significant anti-immigrant sentiment, did not predetermine refugee affairs. Many Americans warmly welcomed refugees, regarding their arrival as consistent with that part of the American tradition that promises succor to victims of persecution. Refugee policymaking, because it was a “national security” issue, was somewhat insulated from anti-newcomer blasts. Likewise, the public could not easily scrutinize refugee affairs because the mechanisms of refugee entry were sometimes obscure and the policymaking process was driven by a relatively small circle of experts, bureaucrats, congressional staffers, and powerful congressional committee chairpersons.² One other peculiarity helps explain refugee admissions in an age of restrictionist sentiment. The 4 million refugees who entered between 1945 and 2000 amounted to nearly 15 percent of all newcomers, a figure large enough to notice, but no so large as to overshadow—in the eyes of restrictionists—the greater problem of immigrant entry.

Much of the literature on the United States and refugees has been written by anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and legal scholars. Such accounts, worthy as they are, too often lack the very strengths of the historian's craft: deep archival research; contextualization in larger foreign policy, political, social, economic, and cultural trends; and a narrative that explains change over time with attention to historical detail.³ The few works of history on refugee affairs during the Cold War have established a basic narrative and explanatory framework that emphasizes the link between American foreign policy and the commitment to refugees.⁴ This explanation has much merit given the importance of the Cold

War to the United States over the second half of the twentieth century. The U.S. government's decisions about which refugee crises deserved attention—and which required intervention—always took Cold War foreign policy goals into account. Government officials stressed that refugee entry would benefit the nation's diplomacy. Finally, sometimes these refugee programs—the best examples being the American responses to Hungarian and Cuban refugees—were important parts of larger Cold War foreign policy initiatives.

The best-developed area in the history of refugee affairs—the study of American refugee policies in the World War II era (roughly from 1933 to 1952)—avoids such a singular focus on foreign affairs, however. Historians like David Wyman, Leonard Dinnerstein, Michael Marrus, and Haim Genizi have explained American policies toward refugees from the Nazis and the survivors of the Holocaust with well-rounded attention to domestic politics, culture, and economics as well as U.S. foreign policy concerns.⁵ This scholarship has much in common with the best of the latest work in immigration history. The hallmark of the “new immigration” history, by scholars like Mai Ngai, Gary Gerstle, Dan Tichenor, and Aristide Zolberg, is its attempt to understand the history of newcomers to the United States within the larger themes—like racial and sexual inequality, the growth and power of the state, and the increasingly transnational nature of American life—that help define the American experience. This new immigration history, though, suffers from a blind spot when it comes to refugees; more often than not, the refugee story is left unaddressed or subsumed under the immigration story.⁶

Americans at the Gate builds and expands upon these insights. Two contentions stand at the center of this book. First, refugee policies, laws, and programs in the post-World War II era were the product of interactions between foreign policy imperatives and domestic political and cultural considerations. As a result, refugee affairs clearly demonstrate that the United States' domestic and international histories should not—and indeed cannot—be disaggregated.⁷ Second, the history of refugee affairs cannot be found just in the policy and political battles that produced refugee programs and laws, but must be located as well in the implementation and administration of those programs and laws.

Without question, the Cold War was vital to the construction and maintenance of an American commitment to refugees. Many (but not all) Americans believed that the entry of refugees would provide the nation with an advantage over the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Refugee admissions aided Cold War diplomacy by satisfying American allies and fortifying them in the face of population pressures and refugee flows that caused political, economic, and social instability. Moreover, American leaders believed that refugees—especially those persons fleeing communism, the

Soviets, or their allies—were living symbols of Soviet brutality and communism’s failure. Thus, refugee admissions struck a rhetorical blow against the Soviets and reminded the world of the United States’ unbending commitment to anticommunism and winning the Cold War. It is little wonder, then, that for much of the post–World War II era, Americans, from presidents to the public, associated refugees with anticommunism. Americans continued to think of refugee admissions as an aspect of foreign policy even when the Cold War and muscular anticommunism waned. In the 1970s, as the Cold War consensus that was birthed more than twenty years earlier shattered, portions of both the political left and right supported refugee entry as an articulation of a post-Vietnam and post-détente foreign policy.

Refugee admissions were part and parcel of the United States’ engagement with global issues, but those efforts were also surprisingly unilateralist. The policies, laws, and programs the U.S. government designed to admit refugees were constructed and conducted with little consultation with other nations or with international organizations. Of course, the United States occasionally worked with organizations such as the United Nations to solve refugee problems and to expedite resettlement. Likewise, it frequently and successfully campaigned for other nations to admit refugees. In fact, some countries admitted more refugees as a percentage of their total population than the United States. Ultimately, though, American refugee admissions ran along parallel tracks to the efforts of other nations and organizations, never truly intersecting with them. The history of American refugee affairs is an international history, then, but it is a peculiar one in which the United States acted unilaterally to solve a global problem.

An explanation of the development of refugee policies, laws, and programs that focuses almost exclusively on foreign policy imperatives leaves some curious gaps, though. If foreign policy concerns were the most significant force behind U.S. refugee affairs, then why in the early 1950s, with Cold War tensions running high in Europe, did the Refugee Relief Program (RRP) deny entry to large numbers of eastern and central European refugees seeking admission to the United States? If refugee admissions were such a vital tool in the confrontation with the Soviets, why did the Cold Warrior president Ronald Reagan repeatedly reduce the Soviet and Indochinese refugee quotas in the 1980s? If refugee policies, laws, and programs were purely Cold War foreign policy tools, it stands to reason that the United States would have granted admission to all applicants for RRP visas in the 1950s and maintained high admissions quotas in the 1980s. American foreign policy, then, has played an important, but not the sole and starring, role in the history of American refugee affairs.

Rather, refugee admissions in the post–World War II era were just as strongly rooted in political, cultural, economic and social conditions in the United States as they were in foreign affairs and U.S. foreign policy considerations. Politicians (and the political parties they represented) chose to support or oppose particular refugee programs based in part upon the partisan and electoral advantages to be won. Domestic political developments—like the Red Scare and domestic anticommunism of the 1950s—found their way into debates about potential refugee admissions and institutionalized in the bureaucratic structures of refugee programs themselves. Social changes at home—like the successes of the African American civil rights movement and the women’s movement—created a political and cultural environment much more welcoming to refugees, and suggested new reasons why the United States should help refugees; it is certainly no coincidence that the United States only began admitting refugees of color in any appreciable numbers after the freedom movements of the 1960s had reshaped American society and attitudes concerning race and ethnicity.

Perhaps nothing better illustrates the domestic roots of American refugee affairs than the ways in which refugee policies, laws, and programs depended upon, and were undergirded by, evolving notions of American identity and citizenship. Through the first half of the twentieth century, the dominant definition of American identity rested upon ethnonational or racial characteristics. In the post–World War II era, this racialized conception of identity slowly lost ground to one that stressed adherence to particular political and ideological traits. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the politicized definition of “American” emphasized anticommunism, but with the 1960s freedom movements, it came to stress the protection of individual rights and explicitly rejected ethnonational and racial benchmarks. The politicized definition of “American” both fractured and evolved by the 1970s, but many Americans—on the left and right—grounded their vision of national identity in the protection of supposedly universal, individual rights, even as they defined those rights somewhat differently.⁸

Conceptions of American identity infused refugee affairs at all levels. The essential equation at the foundation of American refugee politics roughly mirrored the transformations in American identity. In the 1950s, that equation was “refugee equals European, anticommunist.” By the 1970s, it read “refugee equals person (of any nationality, race, religion, or political persuasion) whose human rights are endangered.” Advocates and opponents of refugee admissions manipulated notions of national identity to justify their positions—and then tried to shape refugee policies, laws, and programs by inserting specific codicils that reflected these conceptions of national identity. Moreover, officials charged with running

refugee programs measured refugee applicants against what they perceived to be “American” benchmarks. This book, then, grounds definitions of American identity in specific refugee policies and laws, in the arguments of their proponents and opponents, in the programs that brought refugees to the United States, and in the work of the officials who administered these programs and actually approved the admission of refugees.

As a result, the history of refugee affairs offers a window onto the history of American identity. Rather than being predominately an ephemeral and rhetorical product of the national imagination and discourse, this book argues that notions of “American” shaped the daily lives of persons living in the United States and those who wanted to join them.⁹ The history of refugee affairs also clarifies the bifurcated nature of American identity in the postwar years. Conceptions of national identity after 1945—in refugee politics and American politics and culture generally—often highlighted political beliefs or characteristics. But American identity, as it played out in refugee politics, also centered on a whole universe of attributes—relating to gender, to work, and to consumption—that while politicized also sprung from cultural or social assumptions. Indeed, the very richness of “American”—the multiple and varied qualities assigned to that descriptor—made it both a potent political weapon and a point of conflict in refugee affairs.

The book’s second contention is that a fuller and more complete history of refugee affairs requires understanding the implementation and administration of refugee policies, laws, and programs. Most accounts assume that once the Congress or the president announced that the United States would admit “x” number of refugees, then “x” number of refugees were admitted.¹⁰ This book shows that policy formulation or a law’s passage was only half the battle. The other half largely took place in particular bureaus of the State Department or the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). In Washington, D.C., officials from these departments set up the refugee programs, established admissions guidelines, and chose staff and administrators, while INS and State Department officers stationed in the field ran these refugee programs, including the security screening that each refugee applicant received.

By examining how refugee programs ran on the ground, a new and more complex story emerges. First, a focus on the process by which refugees were (or were not) admitted reinforces the point that refugee entry was never guaranteed; State Department and INS officials in the field and in Washington, D.C., could effectively slow or halt or, in some cases, expedite the admission of refugees. Second, as these government officials went about their tasks, they brought their own ideological, political, and cultural predilections to the daily management, administration, procedures,

and workings of refugee programs. It made a difference, in other words, that an ardent anticommunist and ally of restrictionists and red-baiters was the most important American government refugee official in the 1950s, whereas the State Department's leading refugee spokesperson nearly thirty years later was a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, a civil rights movement veteran, and an important proponent of human rights. All of this reinforces an earlier point: American politics and political culture, not just foreign policy, established the tenor of the American commitment to refugees.

The story of refugee affairs is also, then, a study of policymaking and governance in the decades after World War II. Refugee policies, laws, and programs did not originate *sui generis*; they were built upon or borrowed from prior procedures and programs that admitted newcomers, both refugees and immigrants. Ideological continuity buttressed this procedural consistency. For much of the postwar period, the guiding assumption among policymakers and politicians was that refugees were European and anticommunist. Moreover, the U.S. government's publicity campaigns, undertaken throughout the postwar years to tamp down restrictionist opposition, ascribed to arriving refugees a mix of political (anticommunist) and apolitical (particular gender roles, industriousness, and consumption) traits that resulted in the stabilization of the "refugee equals European anticommunist" equation at the heart of policymaking for nearly three decades. This proved a difficult equation from which to depart—witness the failure (until 1980) of determined refugee advocates to win acceptance of a broader, less Cold War–influenced, commitment to refugees. But policymaking continuity and stability—be it procedural or ideological—had its limits. The implementation of refugee programs repeatedly devolved into battles that reopened some of the basic premises that seemed decided during policy formation (or in the early phases of policy implementation). Moreover, while future programs often inherited the bureaucratic structures and administrative rules of their predecessors, actors stretched and rethought those structures and rules. In the largest sense, then, this book reminds historians of government policies that they need to pay as much attention to implementation and administration as they do to policymaking and the drafting of legislation.¹¹

These themes clearly emerged as the United States dealt with refugees during the first half of the twentieth century, the subject of chapter 1. Between 1900 and 1930, anti-newcomer sentiment mounted, best symbolized by passage of the national origins quota immigration system and the failure to aid refugees from Nazism. Restrictionist power began to dissipate slightly after World War II, a conflict that created a refugee crisis of at least 10 million stateless persons in Europe alone. The first step was the 1948 Displaced Persons (DP) Act, which brought about 400,000

refugees to the United States over four years in an attempt to speed Europe's postwar reconstruction. The DP program coincided with the onset of the Cold War, which began to reshape immigration and refugee affairs in the early 1950s. It made its first mark in immigration law with the passage of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act (MWA) that reformed and bolstered the quota system. The MWA debates revealed the centrality of Cold War national security concerns to both the liberalizer and restrictionist intellectual arsenals and the importance of anticommunism to the politics of immigration policy. Moreover, as conceptions of American identity (as defined by all sections of the political spectrum) came to emphasize anticommunism, both liberalizers and restrictionists stressed how newcomers did—or did not—measure up to benchmark political ideals.

The Cold War, which only deepened the post-World War II refugee problem, had an equally transformative effect upon American refugee affairs. The Eisenhower administration and key liberalizers saw the Refugee Relief Program (chapter 2) and the Hungarian refugee admissions (chapter 3)—the most important refugee programs of the 1950s—as parts of an anticommunist and anti-Soviet Cold War foreign policy. Both programs also had domestic political roots; the former mollified opponents of the MWA and the latter fulfilled at least some of the “liberationist” rhetoric employed by the Eisenhower administration to recruit voters of eastern European backgrounds. These programs, forged in the incendiary domestic politics of anticommunism, reflected the era's powerful anticommunist-centered Americanism. Restrictionists essentially exported the Red Scare-era investigatory state to the RRP, mandating investigations into each refugee's political history and beliefs and effectively establishing an anticommunist litmus test for entry. Their goal was to scuttle the RRP, and they nearly succeeded. But with the Hungarian admissions of 1956 and 1957, the U.S. government relaxed numerous entry requirements in order to speed refugee entry in the face of a mounting diplomatic and public relations disaster after the Soviets crushed the Hungarian Revolution. These programs, which in total admitted nearly 300,000 refugees, underscored three lessons. First, they cemented the basic equation at the heart of refugee politics—and refugee programs in the field—for the next thirty years: refugee equals anticommunist European. Second, both programs were ad hoc responses to refugee crises. Finally, both programs demonstrated how anticommunism bonded foreign policies, domestic politics and culture, and refugee affairs in the 1950s.

During the 1960s, the American commitment to refugees evolved, although its early Cold War-influenced foundations did not shatter. The same could not be said for immigration law, the subject of chapter 4. Liberalizers in 1965 finally succeeded in destroying the national origins quota immigration system. Why did immigration laws liberalize and refu-

gee laws not, despite the strenuous efforts of a fast-developing subset of refugee experts within the liberalizer bloc who wanted permanent, substantial, less Eurocentric, and less Cold War–centered refugee policies? Cold War foreign policy concerns contributed to immigration reform’s passage, but more important were the great social and political movements of the 1960s, especially the African American civil rights movement, that celebrated the autonomous, rights-bearing individual and validated a vision of American identity theoretically, at least, absent racist and ethnonational biases. While the domestic revolutions legitimated a less Eurocentric focus in refugee affairs and a definition of refugee focused on the protection of individual rights, Cold War foreign policy concerns buttressed the existing justification for aid to refugees and the established meaning of “refugee.”

The entry of 500,000 Cuban refugees between 1959 and 1973, the focus of chapter 5, did even more to reinforce the status quo. Rising Cold War tensions and long-term political and cultural ties between the island and the United States guaranteed an “open door” for fleeing Cubans. With Red Scare political culture receding, the majority of Cubans in comparison to their 1950s predecessors faced less rigorous admissions requirements, a weakened anticommunist litmus test, and less pointed questions about their political history. The Cuban program did bring one remarkable change. The U.S. government essentially condoned divided loyalties among Cuban refugees by allowing them to become citizens while fully acknowledging that many of these newly minted citizens would likely return to a post-Castro Cuba.

A chief legacy of the 1960s political and social upheavals—as well as the stunning foreign policy failures in Vietnam—was the reinvigoration of a human rights movement. Human rights concerns in turn shaped, and were shaped by, the admission during the 1970s of Soviet, Chilean, and Indochinese refugees, the topic of chapter 6. Their entry marked a real break with past policies that had favored admission of European, anticommunist refugees. While Soviet Jews fled communism, Chileans did not, and the Indochinese escaped horrifying circumstances perpetrated by communist governments and genocidal maniacs with no clear political ideology. The politics surrounding the admission of all three groups focused less on the traditional Cold War rationales and more on the American duty to defend and protect human rights. Just as important, some American officials attempted to bring human rights considerations to the fore of the admissions process itself, though with less than complete success.

The apogee and subsequent decline of human rights politics in refugee affairs came in the 1980s, the focus of chapter 7. The 1980 Refugee Act mandated at least fifty thousand annual refugee admissions and defined a “refugee” as a victim of “persecution on account of race, religion, na-

tionality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” while omitting any reference to communism or communist states.¹² The Reagan White House’s administration of the Refugee Act delivered upon and betrayed the law’s promise. In the 1980s, the United States accepted record numbers of refugees and from parts of the world it had previously neglected. But the Administration consistently shrank annual admissions, heeding resurgent antinewcomer sentiments in domestic politics, and proved most hospitable to refugees from communism, which resonated with Reagan’s ardent anti-Soviet and anticommunist foreign policy. Nor did the Refugee Act bring an end to controversies over admission procedures, which raged throughout the 1980s over whether those entering the United States actually met the definition of refugee.

At the Cold War’s end, the United States annually admitted tens of thousands of refugees and while the superpower conflict passed in the early 1990s, refugee admissions continued in the post-Cold War era. Viewed from the perspective of 1945, this was an extraordinary historical evolution. It was also, as this book demonstrates, a rich history deeply intertwined with continuing battles over immigration and newcomers, a Cold War foreign policy that brought the United States a new and larger role in the world, the civil rights revolution that forever changed American society, the growing power and capacity of the American state, and the triumphs and failures of the human rights movement. The history of refugee affairs, then, is also a history of some of the defining aspects of the modern American experience.