

Floor Statement by
CONGRESSMAN LES AuCOIN

"Oregonians Demonstrate Americanism"

MR. AuCOIN. Mr. Speaker, I want to commend today a wave of human goodwill spreading in my home state of Oregon, which I am sure is spreading in other states as well. Propelling this wave of goodwill is a group called the Oregonians to Save the Boat People who are demonstrating the best qualities of America, truly the land of the free.

A tenet of human ethics is that those who show mercy shall receive it in kind. But for Americans, we have even more reason to shelter the homeless because we are a nation of immigrants, many of whom, like the Boat People, have been driven from the shores of their homeland, never to return.

Our forefathers found a place of refuge here, and remembering their good fortune they made this nation into an international refuge for others who followed that were equally unfortunate. It is our legacy to house the homeless. It is our shame when we don't.

There are outcries in our country that we cannot afford charity, that our problems are too awesome. To people at sea with no home, no future, this must seem the ultimate in either greed or self-delusion.

I submit we cannot afford such callousness. We are not paupers. We are the stewards -- not perpetual squires -- of great abundance, great enough to help the disadvantaged and still not suffer. Moreover, history has treated us kindly for welcoming to our shoulders the world's castaways -- from England, France, Germany, Poland, Italy. Not to mention the Africans and Chinese we brought to our land to build our industry or harvest our crops. From this has sprouted an industrious and innovative people, and a people with a collective memory and conscience.

Americans, remembering our own "Boat People" in the Mayflower and in slave ships, should empathize with refugees from Indochina and move into action to prevent something approaching in its grimness another human holocaust.

The Oregonians to Save the Boat People, in conjunction with the International Rescue Committee and the Portland Indochinese Center, is set upon sponsoring directly 100 Indochinese refugees a month, using the Portland Indochinese Center's welcome house programs.

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The Committee seeks to provide temporary housing, along with food, clothing and basic orientation. Permanent housing then will be found for refugee families, and support services, such as financial aid, will be made available until the family can gain self-sufficiency.

The Oregonians to Save the Boat People estimate this effort will cost \$500 per person, or approximately, \$50,000 per month for the 100 refugees. Since the International Rescue Committee will match Oregon contributions, the total cost for Oregonians will run about \$25,000 per month, or \$300,000 per year.

Coming when the Western world, led by the United States, has agreed to accept double the amount of Boat People, the effort by Oregonians to save the Boat People is very timely. The WASHINGTON POST, in a recent series of articles, estimated that 318,951 Indochinese refugees remained in camps, even though more than 300,000 refugees had already been resettled throughout the world, including more than 206,000 in the United States. Since that series, thousands more Vietnamese have set to sea and have entered a camp or remain adrift. Many reach no destination and are lost.

Cold statistics obscure the reality of this exodus. These are people who have endured more than a generation of war, corruption and tyranny. Life may not have very much meaning for many of these refugees, but that is all the more reason for rising to this enormous challenge. Inhumanity breeds more inhumanity through its hand-aided non-involvement. The world, quite properly, chastised Germans for looking the other way while Jews were annihilated. Unlike the Germans, nothing stands in our way of getting involved and extending a helping hand.

Many Americans voice legitimate concerns about more competition for jobs, especially at a time when recession is setting in. I have looked into this question. The facts don't reveal that refugees, once fully trained, are stealing jobs from Americans. Quite the contrary, it would appear refugees are filling jobs no one else wants. For example, the Oregon Employment Division recently dispatched a busload of Huong tribesmen to a farm near North Plains, Oregon, where they picked strawberries on the verge of rotting because of a lack of pickers.

Among the 50 states, Oregon has one of the highest per capita concentrations of Indochinese refugees -- one to a little more than 350 Oregonians, compared with a 1 to 1,150 ratio nationwide. There are 6,500 Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao or Chinese refugees in Oregon, 80 per cent of whom live in the Portland area. Estimates place new arrivals in excess of 180 per month.

Page 3

"Oregonians Demonstrate Americanism"

Under the administration of former Governor Bob Straub, Oregon achieved impressive success in providing basic language skills and job training, including a fundamental understanding of our working environment. Job placements increased and the number of refugees remaining off welfare declined.

This effort must be redoubled. And it can be with a new wave of good will and volunteerism. This is the spirit of America.

Nothing can be more fitting than a state such as Oregon, a symbol throughout the country for its jealously guarded quality of life, to open its doors widely to men and women in need of a haven. Nothing can be more fitting than a state such as Oregon, which teases tourists from other states to come to visit, but not stay, to open its treasure chests and share its wealth with people who have known of little, and have even less.

Nothing can make me prouder as an Oregonian than to see opened the doors of my state, because closed doors reflect closed hearts. And if we have lost our compassion for people whose misery mirrors that of our own flesh and blood, then we have lost a very great deal.