Overview

Safe Haven? aims to provide an integrated account of refugees in America over the past seventy years, with balanced attention to the refugees and the way America has responded to them. The issues raised by the book are important for those who work with refugees, for those who seek to understand how American immigration policy responds to different kinds of newcomers, and for those interested more generally in American society, particularly its dual historical roots as land of opportunity and land of refuge.

The book may also be useful for those outside the United States who seek an extended case example of how international and domestic considerations interact in refugee policy, how refugees are reshaped in the image of a country’s broader experience with immigration, or simply what to expect of the United States in the global arena for issues of refugees and other displaced populations.

Chapter by chapter discussion suggestions

Chapter 1 provides an historical review of the relationship between refugees and America. That review suggests periods of acceptance but also periods of rejection, program efforts that have often been successful but also often inadequate and sometimes misdirected. The historical material also suggests how complex is the American response to refugees, ranging from abstract humanitarian concerns, to a sense of direct personal responsibility, to recognition of shared religious or political commitments.

Issues for discussion:

- How are these historical notions of America as land of opportunity and as land of refuge reflected in contemporary discussions of refugees and immigrants?

- How can the differing legal, personal, religious, and social science approaches to refugees be reconciled?

- How we would actually know if our efforts in resettling refugees were successful?

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the experience of refugees after arrival in the United States. The discussion covers practical issues, including the strong effects of prior occupation, education, and English language competence on resettlement, but also
outlines how the very experience of being a refugee separates the refugee experience from that of other immigrants.

Issues for discussion:

- What problems are refugees most likely to face in resettlement, and are these similar or different compared to other kinds of migrants to the United States?

- What does the refugee experience tell us about how people make sense of their lives, especially when those lives are disrupted and reconstructed in ways that are unpredictable, harrowing, and often truly terrifying?

- How does the experience of refugees reflect core American values, both civic and religious? Making a new start, for example, is a classic theme in American secular culture, and flight to a land of refuge is a crucial theme in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage.

Chapter 3 moves the discussion to a particular locality and the way in which the refugee experience is presented through the media to the local community. This review of press accounts suggests a composite American view that acknowledges the difficulties refugees have faced but also presses them toward becoming exemplary immigrants—as if their pasts were now completed and they could devote themselves fully to a new life in America.

Issues for discussion:

- What problems do refugees face in fulfilling American expectations about their new lives? Are American expectations realistic?

- How does this kind of localized story of resettlement relate to broader national discussions of refugees—and other immigrants? Do the issues look the same at the local and national levels?

- Do you actually agree with this portrait of how Americans characterize refugees? Might this portrait be different in other localities, other regions of the United States, with different kinds of refugees, or at different times (as with shifting economic and national security concerns)?

Chapter 4 discusses how refugees fit into the most important American identity categories, particularly of race and ethnicity. The basic argument in the chapter (with which you may or may not agree) is that refugees do not fit very well or clearly within these racial and ethnic categories, but are nevertheless forced into them. Even when the refugees themselves can escape these categories, their children are inevitably forced into them.
Issues for discussion:

- What exactly is the relationship between race and ethnicity in the United States? How do the two overlap and how are they actually different, or supposed to be different?

- Why is it that the use of race and ethnic markers is so essential in almost all U.S. research and data collection, whereas religion and political views (often extremely important to refugees) are not collected in most government research?

- What would you recommend to refugees as a strategy for dealing with these seemingly unavoidable labels, and their often very serious consequences? How should they help their children deal with their identities?

Chapter 5 focuses on the elemental social fact that people are rarely isolated individuals. Their lives are embedded within social groups, the most basic of which is what we generally call “the family,” although it has a wide variety of forms and functions. Refugees, because of the hazards and losses of flight, often must be particularly creative in the use of the family resources that they have remaining. As an extended example, the chapter considers Vietnamese refugees and the kinds of family resources they have utilized in their long history of migration within Vietnam, and now in migration to the United States.

Issues for discussion:

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of multi-generational family households? What are the advantages and disadvantages of smaller nuclear family households? Are these pros and cons different for newcomers and for the native-born?

- What can be done to provide some alternative to family support for those refugees who have lost family members?

- What obstacles does American society place in the way of refugee families, and perhaps in the way of families in general?

Chapter 6 discusses the programs designed to assist refugees in their often difficult adjustment to the United States. In particular, the chapter focuses on the two key program goals of English language competence and economic self-sufficiency. Both these goals seem to make sense, but the ways to achieve them are often unclear, and the logic of the goals can lead to programs that limit rather than enhance refugee lives.

Issues for discussion:

- Try to outline a refugee resettlement program that could address the needs of very different kinds of refugees. For example, you might consider young university-
educated refugees from Eastern Europe, non-literate hill farmers from Southeast Asia, and unaccompanied children from Central Africa. Can one program serve all these people?

- What would you honestly tell arriving refugees about what they will face in America? What options do they really have? What difficulties will they be unable to avoid? How should they deal with Americans?

- What do you learn from the refugee program about how social programs are created in the United States? Are there broader lessons here about how government programs are set up, or should be set up?

Chapter 7 reviews the historical issues in refugee resettlement, notes some of the problems in defining who refugees are, and assesses the current adequacy of safe haven in the United States.

Issues for discussion:

- Is the existing legal definition of refugees adequate for current and future problems? For example should people forced to move because of climate change be formally designated as “refugees”?

- How do refugees fit into the larger issues of U.S. immigration policy? For example, what would be a reasonable number of annual refugee admissions compared to other kinds of admissions?

- How should the United States conduct itself on the global level in terms of refugees? What should its role be?

Some additional sources

As a way to round out and complement the discussions in this book, here are a few quick suggestions on additional sources.

For Chapter 1, read David Wyman’s *Paper Walls* for a better sense of the World War II situation and the classic mechanisms used to keep refugees out. If you can’t obtain the book, watch the PBS *American Experience* episode *America and the Holocaust*, which includes much commentary from Wyman.

For Chapter 2, try a literary complement to the social science approach here. Highly recommended are Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* and Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* [about the Vietnamese]. You will come away with a far richer notion of the complexity of the refugee experience, including how those who flee and those who don’t are often still bound together.
For Chapters 3, 4, and 5, try reading two or three focused accounts of particular refugee
groups in particular locations. There are now many excellent options, both edited books
with chapters on different groups and full length ethnographies. Two that merit special
attention for sheer readability are Anne Fadiman’s *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall
Down* (about a Hmong family with an epileptic child) and John Bul Dau’s *God Grew
Tired of Us*, the story of one of the “lost boys” of Sudan.

For Chapter 6, take a quick look at the web site of the U.S. Office of Refugee
Resettlement and then actually read the latest annual report, including paying attention to
the tables and even the appendices. You will learn a lot. You might also review the text
and testimony for the Refugee Protection Act of 2010, sponsored by Senator Patrick
Leahy. That will give you a sense of the current trouble spots in the U.S. response to
refugees.

For Chapter 7, consider a more general book on refugees that will help place the U.S.
experience in broader international context. One excellent, especially well-written option
is Caroline Moorehead’s *Human Cargo*. You might also look at the website of the United
Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and read the latest annual report
there.