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REFUGEES FROM COMMUNISM: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE?

What is the most predictable event that happens after the Communists take over a country? Loss of basic freedoms? Purge trials? Economic disaster? All those things do happen, but the most predictable result is the river of refugees who run from slavery to freedom.

That elementary truism is the most compelling reason for supporting President Reagan's program to prevent the Communists from taking over any other country in the Western Hemisphere. Millions of refugees would walk north across our borders, and there would be no practical way to stop them.

Since 1945 some 20 million people have fled from countries taken over by Communism. Two and a half million of them now live in the United States.

Here is the count, as detailed by H. Eugene Douglas, our U.S. Ambassador for Refugee Affairs. From Eastern Europe, the United States received one-fifth of the 2,015,000 refugees. From the Soviet Union, we received one-fourth of the 400,000 refugees. From the Baltic Nations, we received 40% of the 200,000 refugees.

From Vietnam, we received 40% of the 1,000,000 refugees. From Laos, we received almost half of the 282,000 refugees, and from Cambodia one-third of the 224,000 refugees. From Cuba, we received five-sixths of the 1,250,000 refugees, and from Nicaragua 60% of the 100,000 refugees.

As many refugees come to the United States as can possibly get here. More than 640,000 refugees from Southeast Asia came all the way across the Pacific Ocean to the United States. They had to surmount overwhelming obstacles and endure the most hazardous circumstances.

Various reasons, especially geography and nationality, prevented some of the largest groups of refugees from reaching our borders. Only a small percentage came to the United States from among the 6,500,000 East German refugees, 4,000,000 Chinese refugees, the 60,000 Tibetan refugees, the 3,300,000 Afghan refugees, the 1,000,000 Ethiopian refugees,

and the 200,000 Angolan refugees.

The sufferings of those refugees who do not make it to the United States are horrible. At least five million refugees from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Southeast Asia have no legal residence in the country where they now are; they are living in the most abject poverty, hunger, and privation.

History teaches us that, when the Communists take over any country, the result is an immediate, massive exodus, and usually a continuing flow of refugees (depending on the efficiency of the barbed wire fences, mine fields, and border guards). The 30-year, world-wide experience is that 10% of the population emigrates as refugees any time the Communists take over a country.

The American people need to face up to the horrendous prospects of what can happen at our doorstep in Latin America. If El Salvador is taken over by the Communists, 10% of its population of 4,700,000, or 470,000 people, would become refugees and walk north.

Here are the 10%-of-population figures in the other countries in Central America: Costa Rica 240,000, Guatemala 750,000, Honduras 410,000, Nicaragua 260,000, and Panama 200,000. If there ever was a part of the world where we should guard against a "falling dominoes" effect, it is Central America.

It would be ridiculous to think that our neighbor to the south, Mexico, would or could absorb these refugees. Mexico already has tremendous unemployment and is in debt up to its ears. If Central America falls, Mexico could fall, too, and 10% of its population of 69,400,000 (that means 6,940,000 refugees) would walk north in addition to the two million from Central America.

Could we close our borders to neighbors who face certain persecution from new Communist dictators subsidized by Moscow? Could we accept the costs of this new influx of refugees -- costs in social-program dollars and in domestic conflicts?

How would we face the blurring of the difference between immigrants and refugees? Immigrants are people who choose to leave their native country and live in the United States; refugees are people who leave their homes or face death. If it were a simple matter of residence preference, much of the rest of the world would probably want to come to the United States.