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Democratic Congressional Dinner

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
Mr. MANSFIELD. Mr. President, as so often happens, I find myself on the side of the distinguished senior Senator from Oregon. That goes back for a number of years. Once again, he has come up with a solution to a difficulty which I had intended to discuss at the time the Cranston-Allen amendment was being debated, but during that period, I had a conversation with the distinguished Senator from Oregon (Mr. HATFIELD). He indicated to me what he had in mind and I wholeheartedly approve of this approach, because it ties in, in part, with some remarks I am about to make.

I am delighted that the Senate, this afternoon, almost unanimously approved the Cranston-Allen amendment. I am delighted to report to the Senate that the Committee on Foreign Relations, instead of initiating hearings on the President's request for $507 million on Tuesday, will meet instead on Monday morning, and therefore, the committee did indicate its interest and its desire to get along. But we should not move too fast. That is the reason why I think it is most important that the proposal offered by the Senator from Oregon be given immediate consideration: Because something has to be done to fill in the stop-gap which will occur at the end of this week and, at the same time, will allow the appropriate committees a time to look into this matter, not hastily but cautiously and carefully, so that we will be sure of what we are undertaking.

Mr. President, on Tuesday last, the President expressed a deep concern for the Vietnamese refugees who have arrived in the United States or are on the way. He recognized a profound moral obligation on the part of this Nation to these 120,000 or more people. I can understand and appreciate the President's concern. Although I opposed the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam from the outset, it seems to me that the President is acting in accord with a national obligation in urging the Nation not to blot out the plight of these unfortunate in a recoil from the overwhelming tragedy of the Vietnamese war. Whether or not it was the proper course to encourage these Vietnamese—and Cambodians, I might say—to build up a dependency on us in the first place is moot. The fact is that the executive branch, with congressional acquiescence, did permit this to happen in the pursuit of the war. We cannot now slough off the consequences without doing violence to our finest traditions.

The administration has indicated that the funds which have been transferred from the foreign aid program to sustain the relief of the refugees to date are just about exhausted, as the Senator from Oregon indicated earlier. Congress is now asked to appropriate $500 million to continue the effort. I trust that this request will be given careful and serious consideration. Time for thought and deliberation are essential if we are to understand
what we are about in this situation and how best to handle it. To be sure, the Vietnamese refugees must be fed and clothed and housed in the meantime. In a government spending $300 billion, however, I must say in all candor that I would find it little short of amazing if there were not a few million uncommitted dollars to carry on the relief work a little longer, to the end that Congress may have adequate time to design appropriate legislation.

The distinguished Senator from Oregon (Mr. HATFIELD) was thinking along the same lines. Perhaps the President can draw several million dollars from the current Defense Department budget of $85 billion to cover the short time it will take to consider the refugee program fully.

Again, the distinguished Senator from Oregon has gone to the source and found out what something in excess of $100 million available. After all, contingent defense needs for Indochina for which, I should think, past appropriations have been changed drastically by recent events. If the President lacks legal authority to transfer such funds to take care of the refugees, what may be needed in the first instance on the current basis from Congress is a grant of authority to make such transfers.

In the meantime, it is my hope and expectation that the Senate will move expeditiously on the President's broader request for $500 million for refugee assistance. In my judgment, however, this is a larger question than merely housing, feeding and shunting thousands of people around the United States.

We need to look beyond the immediate tasks. It is entirely possible, for example, that other countries may be prepared to welcome some of these people and offer them better opportunities than can be found here. In view of the sudden collapse of the previous government in South Vietnam, moreover, it is entirely possible that many refugees left Vietnam in panic, even though they may not have been personally endangered. Indeed, there are reports that some were compelled by superiors to leave, as, for example, Vietnamese Air Force support personnel who were required to fly to Thailand.

Another group was one which wound up in Guam. Reports indicate that a wave of homesickness and second thoughts is passing through the refugee camps—a natural reaction.

In any event, any Vietnamese wishing to move to another country or to return to Vietnam should be given, in my judgment, not only that opportunity but every reasonable financial assistance not only for transportation but for resettlement and rehabilitation. To make this possible, a suitable general understanding must be reached with other governments and, notably, at an appropriate time, the successor government in Saigon and Phnom Penh. I trust that this possibility will be fully examined by the committees considering the administration's request for appropriations. Perhaps, it will be necessary to enlarge the authority which the President seeks in the refugee bill. It may be that what will be needed is a somewhat larger appropriation than has been sought for the refugees, with the understanding that a substantial part of the total will be reserved for a program of resettlement and rehabilitation in their homeland. What would be involved here, of course, is working out arrangements with the new government in Saigon and the engagement in the work of a mutually acceptable private international body, such as the International Red Cross. I must emphasize, too, that I am referring to those refugees who, voluntarily, wish to return but their number may be far greater than is now apparent, provided there are appropriate safeguards.

I reiterate, too, that while the legislation is being devised, if necessary, a special grant of authority to the President should be sought which would permit him to transfer some unobligated funds from elsewhere in the budget, perhaps, from the Defense Department to sustain the refugees, to the end that Congress will have adequate time to consider the principal measure fully.

I commend the distinguished Senator from Oregon on finding these possibilities and for being able to present to the Senate a proposal which should prevent any lapse in taking care of these refugees throughout this country and on American islands in the Pacific, and thereby allowing the committee, which will start hearings on Monday morning, to go into this carefully, cautiously, and thoroughly, and in that way to make absolutely certain of what we are doing.

The Senator, I think, has done the Nation a service.

Mr. HATFIELD. Mr. President, I thank the Senator from Montana, our very distinguished majority leader. He has in a typical statesmanlike way put his finger in the most eloquent and concise manner upon a point of importance, when he speaks to the fact that we need the time for careful consideration of this matter without removing the sense of urgency that exists.

He, also very properly, places his finger on another point, and that is that we are in the process of computing and calculating these unfunded expenditures. We do not have a precise figure, but it is important to empower the President to utilize what funds are deemed as authorized, available and uncommitted funds. That is why we used the language in this bill that we used, which is simply to authorize the President to utilize available military assistance funds for humanitarian purposes in assailing refugees from South Vietnam and Cambodia.