

## The Good Governor: Robert Ray and the Indochinese Refugees of Iowa

Paul Hillmer

*Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota*

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According to Shelton, this shift in sympathies also had racial and gendered dynamics. As employers fled urban centers, the most successful white workers attempted to follow them, often leaving behind financially struggling cities dominated by impoverished and excluded people of color. As teachers—women especially—turned to unionization for professional status and dignity in their workplaces, they came into conflict with people of color, who argued for greater control over the apparatus of the state (including schools) in the name of community empowerment.

These conflicts further alienated members of minority communities from unionism and labor liberalism and empowered conservative critics who saw both public employees and nonwhite urban “rioters” as having “flouted the law and siphoned off the resources of hardworking Americans” (2). It was these battles over 1970s urban teacher strikes, Shelton argues, that forged a producerist rhetoric in which owners and employees of private enterprise were “makers” in conflict with the unproductive “takers” of the urban (often non-white) poor and public employees.

Overall, Shelton makes a compelling case for the importance of teacher militancy in the debates over urban public policy during the 1970s. As he readily admits, however, the book, like any ambitious national study, leaves as many questions as it answers. What role did strikes by other public-sector workers play in this process? How did the provisions of particular laws (for example, arbitration) shape teachers’ risky decisions to engage in illegal strikes? If the teacher strikes of the 1970s played such an important role in undermining labor liberalism, why did the coordinated backlash against public-sector unionism at the state level begin in the 2010s rather than the 1980s? And, of particular interest to Iowans, how did states without large urban centers fit into this framework? Such questions are to Shelton’s credit, however, as they reveal the groundwork his expansive vision has laid for other scholars seeking the roots of neoliberalism in the United States.

*The Good Governor: Robert Ray and the Indochinese Refugees of Iowa*, by Matthew R. Walsh. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2017. vii, 233 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 paperback.

Reviewer Paul Hillmer is dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota. He is the author of *A People’s History of the Hmong* (2010).

Thanks to Matthew Walsh, I now see the connection between the gubernatorial candidate whose hand I shook in 1968 at the Clay County

Fair (still on crutches after his April plane crash) and the people from Laos who moved in across the street from our home in Spencer in the mid-1970s. "From the close of the Vietnam War until 2010," writes Walsh, "Iowa alone resettled refugees as a state-run voluntary agency" (5). Elsewhere, the U.S. State Department contracted with voluntary agencies (VOLAGs) like Catholic Charities or Lutheran Social Services to resettle refugees.

Walsh first focuses on the ethnic Tai Dam, beginning with a fine, necessarily brief introduction to their history and beliefs and the place they occupied during the two phases of the Vietnam War. These were not backward or hapless victims but "shrewd negotiators who managed centuries of survival among more powerful neighbors" (7). Desiring to be resettled together in one place, they wrote letters to 30 American governors. Only one, Iowa's Robert Ray, replied. He requested and received a federal exemption from the State Department rule that required refugees to be scattered across the country. Resettling one linguistic/cultural group, he reasoned, would make assimilation and employment simpler and the state's burden lighter. This emphasis on "cluster resettlement," along with a "work first" philosophy intended to keep refugees off welfare and enlistment of local sponsors responsible for refugees' success, were the program's three cornerstones. "Staying off cash assistance represented a form of assimilation to Iowa culture and work values" (66).

There were bumps along the way. The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare found that families in Ray's program refused welfare (despite qualifying for it), fearing that acceptance would jeopardize relatives' chances for resettlement. That "work first" approach embarrassed ethnic Kinh refugees from Vietnam (settled by the Catholic church), who received welfare at higher rates. Male-dominated Tai Dam culture interacted problematically with America's more "liberated" social norms and with Job Service of Iowa's director, Colleen Shearer (whose criticism of Kinh welfare rates opened the Governor's Task Force to charges of favoritism). Tensions between Tai Dam and African Americans emerged as the former associated blacks with French mercenaries in Southeast Asia, and African Americans who helped resettle Tai Dam felt that their charges were both ungrateful and racist. Even so, problems were taken seriously and addressed effectively, making the Iowa program a model both nationally and internationally.

After discussing the Tai Dam's unique contributions to their own successful resettlement, Walsh discusses the dual crises of the Vietnamese "boat people" and the Khmer refugees who fled the Killing Fields of Cambodia. These events may be more familiar to general readers, but

Walsh provides historical context before detailing Ray's role in helping both populations. In the case of the "boat people," Ray was moved by Ed Bradley's *60 Minutes* television report. Ray and five other governors visited Khmer camps in October 1979. On the day they visited Sa Khaeo, 50 people died (135).

Governor Ray was Christian enough to have compassion for refugee populations, conservative enough (by 1970s standards) to be strategic about resettling them in a fashion palatable to Iowans, and savvy enough to anticipate and blunt criticism. Ray's Iowa SHARES (Sends Help to Aid Refugees and End Starvation) program, launched over the 1979 Thanksgiving weekend, invited Iowans to buy a "share" in humanity for \$2.20, the price of a bushel of corn. Ray's goal of \$115,000 was nearly quadrupled, a sign of his moral and political leadership. By 1980, Ray was playing a crucial role in the creation of the Refugee Act of 1980, which guaranteed three years of federal support to states for the refugees they welcomed.

Walsh dedicates chapters to the perspectives of refugees and the sponsors who worked and lived alongside them. These chapters fit very comfortably in the broader literature of immigration and Southeast Asian refugee history. Shedding little new thematic light for scholars, they are nonetheless indispensable in the telling of this specific story. Walsh's book is as much about refugee agency as it is about Ray's leadership; the short shrift given those accounts in this review does not reflect their importance to our understanding of this subject.

Weaving oral history with state records and broader historical literature into a first-rate yet accessible, short narrative, Matthew Walsh effectively makes the case for Robert Ray's greatness and Iowa's unique role in the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees.

*A Great State Fair: The Blue Ribbon Foundation and the Revival of the Iowa State Fair*, by William B. Friedrichs. Des Moines: Business Publications Corporation, 2017. x, 178 pp. Illustrations, note on sources, notes, index. \$20.00 paperback.

Reviewer Michael Kramme is professor emeritus of theater at Culver Stockton College in Canton, Missouri. His most recent books are *The Governors of Iowa*, *The Schaffner Players*, and *Images of America: Washington, Iowa*.

William B. Friedrichs begins his book by acknowledging several recent books about the Iowa State Fair, explaining that his focus is on the story of the Iowa State Fair Blue Ribbon Foundation. He begins by giving a brief history of the fair. The first two fairs were held in Fairfield. Later fairs were held in Muscatine, Oskaloosa, Iowa City, Dubuque, Burling-