

ENTERING THE UNITED STATES for the first time is like being reborn. Weaned from your motherland, you suddenly see the world in a different light. If you are used to cattle, barns, straw huts and living quarters made of dried clay, the vast aerial nightscape of a glowing Manhattan skyline is a jaw -dropping experience, both intimidating and exhilarating. Imagine waking from a lazy nap and seeing for the first time three trillions glittering lights several thousand feet below, lights beaming from skyscrapers' windows and cars' headlights that speckle like raindrops in a spring storm. Then the flight attendants start passing out customs and immigration forms, forms that you must fill out but do not understand. While you search your purse for a pen the seatbelt sign lights up. The captain makes his announcement on the intercom and asks everyone to buckle up to prepare for landing.

The plane dives at God's speed and your ears start ringing. You feel nauseous. The peanuts that you swallowed earlier are determined to make their way back up your throat. Your head feels as if it is about to explode. Babies start crying as the plane shakes, the engine roars, and the plane's wings fold in complex aerodynamic manners that you do not understand. You grip your seat's armrests and pray that you will live another day. A rush of adrenaline pumps through your veins when the plane's wheels touch solid ground. Screeching brakes remind you of an out -of-tune violin string amplified a thousand times. You open your eyes, relieved to be alive. And then another reality sets in. Fear and anxiety crawl up your spine once more. You may be on U.S. soil, but you are not officially clear yet. Between you and America is U.S. Immigration and Customs. You step out of the plane and scout your new puzzling environment. You follow the crowds through doors, hallways, and tunnels that eventually lead you to a spacious room filled with long lines facing tiny box -like stations. In those stations are immigration officers, the gatekeepers that stand between you and the land of the free.

The world has certainly changed since September 11, 2001. I know, because I was there that morning working in a Manhattan immigration law firm when the planes struck. The steam from my coffee cup had not cleared yet when I heard the news. "The World Trade Center has just been hit!" a colleague hollered as she rushed to my workspace. "Hit by what?" I asked, trying to make sense of this early morning rattle. "A plane," she said. I might not have been fully awake yet but I knew it was not April Fools Day. The reality sunk in when we rushed across the hall to watch the series of events unfold on a small television set. A second plane struck followed by an announcement of a different attack on the Pentagon. "Oh, my God," I said, thinking of my two friends, one working in the World Trade Center and another in DC. I was certain that at least one had perished in the flames. I attempted to call them but all signals were jammed. Later that afternoon, when the sun began to set and the dust from the crumbled remains of the WTC still choked the city air, I ventured across lower Manhattan to catch a boat home. The fires burned that night and for many nights thereafter. I watched the city skyline smoking from afar under the stars while the ferry made its way across the Hudson River.

Yes, I was there when the event unfolded in New York City. I was also there in the aftermath. It did not matter where I went, inside Grand Central Station, on the streets of Times Square, on the loading deck of the Saint George Ferry Station or inside the Staten Island ferry itself, weary soldiers in camouflage uniforms and New York City police officers with their dogs stood guard and kept a close watch. I took short glances at their machine guns and hand pistols, and wondered whether I should dive to the floor, jumped off the boat or run for my life should their guns go off or they turned their dogs loose. I had been in a war before, a different war in a different time, and so I was prepared to survive. "Who among this sea of people is a terrorist and who is going to get shot?" I asked myself as a muscle -packed officer patted me down. His hand pistol was within my reach. I could smell his breathe. The city was in a high state of alert and everyone was on the edge. "Sir, please step aside," another officer addressed a man behind me with a backpack hoisted to his shoulder as he prepared to board the boat.

Things have changed since that historical day. New laws are being passed, new policies installed, and new regulations are being enforced. Given the present state of our nation, a nation agitated by war and terrorist threats, traveling in and out of the U.S. and navigating through its legal system is not like what it used to be. These changes have resulted in a sea of necessary resources for immigrants; but unfortunately immigrants often do not know where to begin looking. Without a proper guide, valuable time, money, and energy can be lost. Mistakes and missteps are made because of one's unfamiliarity with the law or one's misconception of how things work. Knowing what I know, I came up with a solution. That solution is my book on CD -ROM: *Handbook For Immigrants: Visas, Lawyers & Resources*.



RICHARD QUAN is a survivor of Cambodia's Killing Fields, founder of Impact Times, author of *Siren's Silence* and *Handbook for Immigrants: Visas, Lawyers & Resources*. He is currently writing a war novel about the Killing Fields. Copies of *Handbook for Immigrants* on CD-ROM are available for order through the author.

CONTACT: richard@qvisionpress.com

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