

Those Stumbling Blocks to Recognizing Vietnam Don't Have to Trip Us Now

By HALL GARDNER

Everywhere in Vietnam, from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi, Americans are met with smiles and appeals for friendship. Ironically, the Vietnamese people are crying out for the return of America to help them overcome their tremendous problems. The communist government openly admits its gross mismanagement of the economy, widespread corruption and the near-desitute condition of its people.

Despite the difficulties imposed by the U.S. economic embargo and lack of diplomatic recognition, a few Americans are trying to help the Vietnamese. Some are working to assist American families find their Amerasian children, others are working to establish cultural exchanges, hospitals and rehabilitation centers. Vietnamese-Americans, who are returning monthly by the thousands to visit loved ones after long years of separation, simply wish the political bickering would come to an end and that America and Vietnam would resolve their differences, not just for the sake of Vietnam but for the benefit of America, too.

After the years of brutal warfare, why should the United States and Vietnam begin a renewed dialogue? Why should the U.S. government recognize Vietnam?

First, Vietnam is no longer insisting on "war reparations." Its leadership now realizes that the amount and nature of any U.S. assistance it might receive will be determined by its "satisfactory behavior." This change of position makes dialogue easier.

The issue of POW/MIAs should no longer prove a stumbling block to reconciliation. Since September, 1988, four U.S.-Vietnamese teams have risked their lives in hazardous helicopter searches for the remains of 1,800 U.S. servicemen and the whereabouts of 70 Americans who were believed to be alive before capture.

Recognition can speed the process of getting many of the 30,000-50,000 Amerasian children out of Vietnam, as well as many of the 580,000 other applicants to the Orderly Departure Program, who bravely assisted U.S. war efforts and/or suffered in

re-education camps. There is at present a backlog of 9,000 individuals who have been approved by the program but who cannot leave immediately, largely due to air-transportation problems. Were it not for the economic embargo, U.S. airlines could perform a valuable service.

The State Department holds that normalization cannot occur until Vietnam has removed all its troops from Cambodia. That position has become increasingly untenable. Too rapid a withdrawal of the Vietnamese presence (promised by September, 1989) could prove disastrous. The blood-thirsty Khmer Rouge could stage a coup or start a new civil war.

The final stumbling block to U.S.-Vietnamese reconciliation is really the extensive Soviet influence over Vietnam. Yet the very process of normalization and increased trade and investment can help to reduce the Soviet presence. In addition, the former U.S. naval base, Cam Ranh Bay, which is now used exclusively by the Soviet navy, could be opened to permit entry of ships of all nations. What happens to Cam Ranh Bay will depend on the nature of negotiations between the United States, the Soviet Union and Vietnam, but the Soviet presence should not be used as a pretext to thwart the normalization process with Vietnam.

Reconciliation leading to diplomatic recognition will not be easy but it can proceed on a step-by-step basis. A new foreign policy needs to be formulated that will restore the U.S. diplomatic presence in Indochina as a means to counterbalance the influence of the Soviet Union and China in the region. A U.S.-Vietnamese rapprochement would represent a bold initiative that would catch the stolid bureaucrats in both Moscow and Beijing by surprise and help to rebuild the U.S. image abroad by stealing some of the thunder from Mikhail S. Gorbachev's diplomatic offensive. The Bush Administration could be as bold.

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