

Another Historic Presidential Trip



Arthur Hoppe

Hanoi, April 8, 1976

PRESIDENT FORD ended his historic visit to The People's Democratic Republic of Vietnam today with the statement that "this was the week that changed the world."

Before boarding Air Force One, Mr. Ford told the 178 newsmen who accompanied him on the trip that "we have begun to build a long bridge between the great Vietnamese people and the great American people."

He added, however, that the U.S. would "never abandon" President Thieu and his nationalist Vietnamese government that now occupies Wot Dat Island 60 miles off the South Vietnamese coast.

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ANALYSTS AGREED that only a Republican President with Mr. Ford's life-long reputation as an anti-Communist could have politically afforded to visit this Communist nation which the U.S. has refused to recognize for 22 years.

The first hint such a trip might be in the offing came when Hanoi invited an American-Chinese checkers team to come to Red Vietnam. A week later, Henry Kissinger announced he had a stomach ache in Pakistan, giving rise to speculation that he was on a secret mission to either Hanoi or Havana.

Highlight of the President's week-long stay was his televised visit to the historic Ho Chi Minh Trail. "That's a real great trail," Mr. Ford said.

Mrs. Ford, who charmed everyone

during her daily round of visits to schools, sanitariums and bicycle tire factories, praised "the warmth and friendliness" of the people. "And for real Vietnamese cooking," she said, "you can't beat Vietnam."

During a special performance of Hanoi's popular folk opera, "How We Kicked the Yankee Imperialist Pigs Out of Our Happy Homeland," the Fords applauded politely, but with obvious reserve.

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OTHERWISE, the trip went smoothly and was generally well-received in the U.S.

A few Democrats criticized it as a "political sideshow" designed to influence the November elections. And one conservative senator blasted the extensive media coverage.

"I'm sick and tired of seeing nothing on tee-vee but laughing Vietnamese children, smiling Vietnamese leaders, happy Vietnamese workers and statistics on the absence of forcible rape," he said. "Don't these people know they live under communism?"

But President Ford seemed well-pleased with the success of his mission.

As he told the beaming Vietnamese Politburo leaders in farewell ceremonies at the airport today, "I think we've proved that, despite our difference in ideologies, the people of our two great countries, by sitting down and talking together, can be warm and lasting friends."