

Indochina departure a trauma

Associated Press

BANGKOK, Thailand—They carved tropical Parises and profitable plantations out of the jungles, imposed their will over millions and brought the language, the learning and grace notes of European civilization to Indochina.

For more than a century, the French have been first the dominant power, then a vital presence in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Now some time this month the French flag will be lowered for the last time over the one remaining vestige of French power and prestige in the region—the military mission in Vientiane, Laos.

French sources say the Communist-led Pathet Lao has made it clear that the mission, which once trained soldiers it later had to battle, was no longer welcome in its new society.

Meanwhile, the exodus of the French continues

almost daily out of Saigon, where the new Vietnam regime confiscated an estimated \$200 million to \$300 million in French private investment since the Communist victory in April. There has been no talk of compensation.

The French embassy in Saigon, although still functioning, is "hanging by its toes" in the words of one Western diplomat in Bangkok. According to official French estimates, 5,000 to 6,000 French citizens are still left in South Vietnam.

Between 3,000 and 4,000 already have flown out of the country, many of them expatriates bound for a native land they have not lived in for decades.

Unlike the two Vietnams and Laos, where France still maintains diplomatic missions, Cambodia was closed to the French after the victorious Communist-led Khmer Rouge packed the French citizens of Phnom Penh into trucks for a trip out of the country in May.

for France

Dec. 7, 1975

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S.F. Sunday Examiner & Chronicle,

French diplomats say the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh was a considerable shock for France, but not because the French government had any strategic interests left in the area, nor even because of the economic losses.

It was rather a jarring, irrevocable rupture of strong "sentimental ties" the French always have felt for the Indochinese peninsula and a demise of French prestige and cultural influence which had not faded, even after France's bitter war and defeat there in the early 1950s.

French influence in Indochina began in the mid-19th century. The colonial record is still a matter of debate.

But whatever the merits of their, political and economic policies, it is generally acknowledged that the French left a deep and generally positive cultural impact on Indochina.

French archaeologists hacked the ancient ruins of Angkor Wat out of the Cambodian jungle. The French spread their language and educational system without disregarding the local cultures. They transformed Phnom Penh into a lovely city and endowed Saigon with broad, tree-shaded boulevards and graceful buildings.

Some historians also note that it was the French revolutionary tradition that sowed the seeds of insurgency and rebellion that swept Indochina after World War II and engulfed it in flames and blood for the next 30 years.

The French suffered greatly in the first Indochina war, losing more than 170,000 men, or more than three times as many as the Americans later lost. French military and political power ended in 1954, after the Communist-led Viet Minh surrounded a large French garrison at Dien Bien Phu and pounded it into surrender.