

## Topics: How to Get Out of Vietnam — By 1789

By ERIC WIDMER

There is not much point in suggesting now how we have avoided getting bogged down in Vietnam. But in view of the embarrassment about getting out, perhaps the awareness that another country—apart from the emasculated French empire—has solved the problem can lessen the unthinkability of prompt withdrawal.

We resist the comparison with France, but what about China? Historians of Sino-Vietnamese relations (notably A. B. Woodside and T. B. Lam) have shown that twice in the last several centuries, China has extricated itself from Vietnam. Thus, while we get Cambodian prescriptions from the Administration, a little history might also be trotted out.

In the early 15th century, for example, the Yung-lo emperor of the Ming Dynasty became actively engaged in an attempt to bring Vietnam more firmly inside the rim of Chinese influence. A puppet ruler was installed, but when he failed to pan out a border crisis was manufactured and the Ming armies entered Vietnam. Along with the military occupation the whole venture was excused as a means of showing the

Vietnamese people how Confucianism really worked. But reminded that his job was to pacify, not slaughter, the population.

Vietnam did not become a sixteenth province of China, just as it will not become our fifty-first state. The stagnating Chinese army, unsure of why it was in Vietnam, made a good target for the guerrilla leader, Le Loi. But Le Loi's elephant attacks had an even greater impact in Peking, where they made the failure of the Ming policy quite apparent to the new emperor, Hsuan-te. He himself became head of a "Withdraw from Vietnam" party at court—and the Chinese did so.

### Chinese 'Advisers'

Le Loi became King of Vietnam and carried on Vietnamese relations with China, as before. By the late eighteenth century, however, his family's rule had declined. Scared to death of a rebellious Southerner named Nguyen Hue, the bungling Le king fled from Hanoi in 1788. In China, Emperor Ch'ien-lung faced the venerable question of intervention to help his loyal monarch.

At first it was suggested that a small contingent of, quite literally, "special forces," be

sent to Vietnam. These troops, furthermore, would act only as advisers, following the loyalist Vietnamese soldiers in order to give them confidence. But Ch'ien-lung was skeptical.

What is the difference—he asked—between sending special forces and sending in troops? Unfortunately, however, the emperor relied too heavily on the exhortations of an ambitious local Chinese official, General Sun Shih-i, and it was decided to dispatch a military force to Vietnam.

General Sun accomplished the aim of keeping the Le king on his throne, and then hastily sent off a memorial to Peking, asking permission to attack the rebel base in the south. But the emperor and Grand Council demurred. The limited aims of the intervention had been achieved. Why escalate the war further? Instead General Sun was given marching orders to withdraw from Vietnam.

Ch'ien-lung has left posterity (and the United States) a number of helpful comments. Strung together, they come out like this:

"Why should we take Chinese troops, horses, money, and provisions and waste them in such a hot, desolate, and useless place? It is definitely in the

class of not being worth it. . . . Le is timorous and incompetent . . . after his country was recovered he was unable to revitalize himself . . . We cannot protect him. Even if we chase away Nguyen Hue how can we guarantee that there will not be more Nguyen Hues, again coming out to cause trouble? . . . The environment of that place is inhospitable. It is not worth any great involvement. . . . And the people of that country are trapped between the points of arrows and bayonets. Inside or outside of China, it make no difference: foreign people are also innocent and defenseless."

### Lessons of History

Subsequently Nguyen Hue did expel King Le, and he was immediately invited to Peking. Nguyen Hue accepted this invitation. The occasion of his arrival was a festive event. He received the Chinese calendar and camel seal from Ch'ien-lung, as well as some ginseng for his mother. Everyone lived happily ever after, or at least until the lessons of history were once more forgotten.

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