

Xin chào from Viet Nam

VI. A nail in the coffin of colonialism

I have heard the name Dien Bien Phu before. It's sort of a strange name for a Vietnamese town, because it has three syllables, when most places have only two. People here refer to it as plain Dien Bien, though. My guidebook describes the winding mountain roads to and from this remote outpost, just a few dozen kilometers from the Lao border, as the most lovely drive in Southeast Asia. On this point, I think the book might be correct. The mountain vistas, dotted with paddies and farms, are stunning. The stretch out of Sa Pa is a short climb to the fog-encased Tran Ton Pass and then a monumental, gorgeous downhill, along a lush gorge. I could not believe my luck until, suddenly, this beautiful stretch of blacktop vanishes and the road becomes, well, a dry river bed, with big boulders and gullies and sand traps. Fortunately, it is dry. If wet it would be impassable. My map guide indicates no change in road quality! I struggle on this hellish terrain for about 30 kms (I am even going downhill and it is still miserable), the wall of my rear tire is slashed open in three spots, creating three blow-outs over the course of an hour. In desperation I backtrack 15 kms to the closest junction, where I hail a bus, after a two-hour wait. The next day I take an all-day bus ride over 200 kms of this nasty riverbed, compensated in part by all the beautiful vistas, and finally end up in Dien Bien Phu.

I wanted to come to Dien Bien Phu for several reasons. First, because I figured it would be good cycling. It has been, for I bussed the 200 kms of bad road. Second, and more importantly, I wanted to visit the place where 20th century colonialism was given a death blow. Here, in 1954 the French lost a very, very bloody and very, very decisive battle with Ho Chi Minh and his forces for independence, called the Viet Minh. It marked the end of colonialism for Viet Nam, and would have probably marked the pre-stage of a peaceful era, had not the US intervened in a civil war that might not have lasted very long without its intervention. Without US aid, I believe, Ho Chi Minh would have easily overpowered the corrupt regimes of the south and quickly united the country in the early 1960s. US interference delayed the unification for more than a decade. Nevertheless, Dien Bien Phu was an important nail in the worldwide coffin of colonialism. Colonials had already been kicked out of the Americas. Africa was to follow.

Last century humanity managed to inflict a lot of pain on itself. Colonialism, along with militarism and imperialism, was one of the most successful tools for accomplishing this end. The shambles of modern Africa is in no small part the result of European intervention, as it arrested natural human development (i.e., tribal warfare and the creation of logical nation-states) and imposed (and continues to impose) foreign cultures and concepts (urbanization being the worst of the lot). The United States was once a colony, and one might argue that it has turned out OK. It has for many of us, but not for the majority of native Americans, nor for Americans of Japanese decent in the 1940s, nor for Americans of African decent for many past generations. All in all, I think it is fair to classify colonialism as one of man's more evil creations, not as evil as the nation-state or organized religion or agency — by which I mean agents, middlemen and

bureaucrats — but certainly more evil than, say, rap music or body piercings, which are more questions of taste than morality. So, it is with utter delight that I visit Dien Bien Phu.

I walk around Dien Bien Phu. It is Tuesday and the monuments, museums and battlegrounds are supposed to be open to the public. They are closed; there are no other foreign tourists in town. I visit the cemetery. The headstones are blank, nameless; they are only representative. In the French war, soldiers were buried where they died. There was no way later to identify the remains and assign them to named graves. A wall lists names of heroes.

After a few more days of cycling, I return to Song La, from where I take a bus back to Ha Noi, over the road I had cycled once before and bussed once before. I go immediately to the train station, buy a ticket (foreigners pay four times local prices), and take the overnight express. I arrive the next morning in Dong Ha, a little more than a third the way from Ha Noi to Sai Gon in the south of the country. Dong Ha itself is of little interest to the traveler, but it lies in the former DMZ. What American can go to Viet Nam and not visit the former Demilitarized Zone, something etched into my memory by news reports a generation ago.

Which brings me to the American War, which has preoccupied my thoughts for much of this trip. The Vietnamese do not call the war period from the sixties to 1975 as the Viet Nam war. There have been many Viet Nam wars. There's the first China War; that's when they defeated the Chinese in 938 A.D., after nearly a century of subjugation. Then there was the French War, that culminated in the Dien Bien defeat. Also, the more recent China war, where China attacked Viet Nam twenty years ago and lost. And, of course, there was the American war. Vietnamese do not refer to it as a civil war, which is how Americans thought of it. In reality, it stopped being a civil war between the regime in the South and Ho Chi Minh and his associates in the North as soon as American advisors and troops entered into the conflict in the late 1950s. It then became the American war and it stayed the American war until US troops fled the country in 1975.

The United States seems compelled to intervene in civil wars. I view both the Korean Conflict of the 1950s (and our military presence today which only exacerbates the conflict) and the 1990s Gulf War as both civil wars, basically property disputes, the latter fundamentally a conflict between rich and poor Arabs. Not surprisingly, the US took the side of the former, which reimbursed the US government for providing military muscle. I also view Kosovo as a civil war, based on race and religion, and that's how I see most of the conflicts that occur around the globe. For reasons that are often well-intentioned but grossly misguided, the US insists on becoming involved where, I think, it should have no business. My view, however, is in the minority (surprise, surprise), and I suspect US politicians will continue to involve the nation where I think we have no right to be. All they have to do is wave the flag and mention "American interests" or oil prices or academic concoctions like the Domino Theory. Their enemies are labeled isolationists. Whenever I hear that phrase "American interests" I shutter. I agree with the view of the Chinese government that refers to American hopes for world hegemony. I love the word hegemony; it summarizes what America is all about. As Americans

we would love to see a world shaped in the American image: the bill of rights, consumerism, capitalism, democracy. Sadly, more often than not, what is in America's interest is not in the interest of the Chinese, or of the world for that matter. It is certainly not in my interests that the US continues to pursue personal vendettas against the leaders of Cuba, Libya, Yugoslavia or Iraq, for example. I don't think we learned many lessons in Viet Nam, where American involvement was certainly not in the interests of the Vietnamese, and not in the interests of anyone save those who make a profit in wartime.

In my 30 days in this country I have not once heard a single anti-American comment. This surprises me. If ever there were a people on earth who should detest Americans it should be the Vietnamese. They should not be so forgiving. When people ask where I am from — in the south the ubiquitous hello is replaced by “What is your country?” — I refuse to answer. My response is: “Why do you want to know what country I am from?” My questioner then gives me a blank expression; it is clear s/he does not speak English and has used “What is your country?” in the same way others say ‘hello.’ As I travel through Viet Nam, I have no pride in being an American. For the duration of this travel I would rather consider myself a stateless person.

The American military muscle that was flexed here did much damage to both the US and to the Vietnamese. It caused a lot of people of my age to drop out, abandon attempts to meaningfully contribute to society. For example, few decent people who grew up in the 1960s (exceptions being Ralph Nader and Bill Bradley), have entered politics. The political scene that results in the US today is truly sad. The war's destruction to Viet Nam is more tangible. In the DMZ you will not find a tree over 30 years old, thanks to the use of chemical defoliants (e.g., Agent Orange) to clear out the trees that served as cover for the movement of military materiel to guerrillas fighting in the South. Several times I crossed the Ho Chi Minh trail. Actually the trail is not a single road but a series of tracts that finger their way from north to south. Of course, the defoliants did not work. Sure, they destroyed the vegetation, but they did not expose the trail, because all the DMZ was a trail. Every northern Vietnamese with a bicycle or a strap and a basket could be a carrier. Vietnamese were everywhere moving supplies from north to south. From what I can tell, the entire population was fighting this war; I am not sure the American military brass really understood the depth of the commitment of the Vietnamese to getting the Americans, the foreigners like the French before them, out of their country. In the DMZ I take a backpacker tour and visit Khe Sanh, sight of the former American combat base, a famous diversionary attack by the Viet Cong during the 1968 Tet Offensive. We also visit the Vinh Moc Tunnels, an entire community carved into the earth's crust where a village of some 300 people lived for 7 years. After their above-ground village was destroyed by American bombers, the people went underground. During the days, they tended to the fields above ground; at night they retreated to the safety of a massive bomb shelter. Can you imagine a people with such determination ever losing a war fought by an enemy half the globe away?. Indeed, there was no way the Americans could ever win in Vietnam. Just like there is no way the Americans can win anything of significance through military action in the Middle East or in

the Balkans. My country's willingness to serve as the planet's bully-for-hire does not seem in my opinion to make for good foreign relations.

It is a shame that the American War could not produce a significant nail in the coffin of American dreams of hegemony, another type of colonialism.

After the DMZ I have another week of cycling, down through Da Nang, to the tourist meccas of China Beach, Hue (whose sites I see from a hired motorbike) and Hoi An (great sea food). All I highly recommend. Time runs out before I can cycle through the central highlands. I may return in December for that endeavor. Meanwhile, I continue to read García Márquez as I plan an extended cycle trip to Morocco, Andalucia Spain, France and Italy next year.