42 Years Ago in a Far Away Country

Description

It was on this day, May 7th in 1954 that the French forces in Vietnam surrendered to General Giap, culminating the â€œ57 Days of Hell,â€• at a place now burned into the collective military knowledge, as a seminal battle, Dien Bien Phu.

The official website for the battle is here.

There is much to study and much to learn from this battle. Some might argue that we (the US) should have been supportive the man we call Ho Chi Minh in the aftermath of WWII and the subsequent strife in the region could have been avoided. Certainly, William Lederer, a retired Navy Captian with significant experience in SE Asia, tells an interesting story in â€œOur Own Worst Enemyâ€•. I first found this book while at the Naval War College in 87-88 and I have recently purchased a used copy and begun re-reading it. The book was published in 1968, and he prophetically listed a number of major factors that were not going well for us. The most striking, in my reading, was our lack of our understanding of the culture and history of the Vietnamese, and the great regional history, added to the exceptionally limited number of Americans who were literate in Vietnamese. Bill Lederer, on page 54 of his book describes a chance meeting in a bomb shelter in China, while waiting out a Japanese bombing raid, with a Jesuit priest and his assistant , Mr. Nguyen. After the raid, they went to the river gun boat and provided a copy of the US declaration of Independence to this oriental gentleman, at the request of the priest. The story seems to hold together well, when you read this document from Sept 2, 1945 (less than a month after VJ Day).

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It begins thusly:

> All men are created equal; they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.
>
> This immortal statement was made in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776. In a broader sense, this means: All the peoples on the earth are equal from birth, all the peoples have a right to live, to be happy and free.
>
> The Declaration of the French Revolution made in 1791 on the Rights of Man and the Citizen also states: â€œAll men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights.â€•
>
> Those are undeniable truths.

Other reading tells us Ho Chi Minh actively supported the OSS in conducting guerilla warfare against the Japanese forces in the French Indochina region.

The net result, at the end of the war, is we didnâ€™t support freedom for all, but President Truman responded to the request of the French to allow them to return to their SE Asian colonies. The

Japanese prisoners were armed and put to work ferreting out the Vietnamese nationalists, and assisting the French in re-establishing control.

Back to William Lederer. His book describes a people who once fought 1000 (yes, ONE THOUSAND) years agains the Chinese conquerors. Iâ€™d say that shows a cultural mentality of long term thought. By the way, the Vietnamese fought until they prevailed. Thatâ€™s a lesson in â€œstick to it-nessâ€• if I ever read one.

Along the way to our effective withdrawal from the region in 1972, the French felt the fury of a people determined to be their own controlling authority. The French were overcome in a valley base of Dien Bein Phu. Bernard Fall wrote the early story of the battle, â€œHell in a Very Small Place: The Seige of Dien Bien Phuâ€•. Obviously, because of the significance of a battle, where a large industrial nationâ€™s defeat by peasant farmers occured in the post WWII period, many other documents and studies have been conducted.

Miscalcualtion? Entangling alliances? Over confidence? Arrogance? Greed? It happened, its still a story in heroism and strong wills in battle.

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Category

1. Geo-Political
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