

Last month President Obama visited Vietnam for talks with leaders there. In so doing, he became the third US president since 2000 to visit this former enemy. From 1945 to 1975, a total of seven US presidents followed a policy of doing everything possible to de-stabilize the government of Vietnam. This policy was strange, since Vietnamese leaders worked with the US during World War II. President Roosevelt even sent White House agents to help Ho Chi Minh during the last year of that war. Thus Ho Chi Minh had every reason to expect that the US would support his goal of ending French colonial control over Vietnam after the war ended. Instead, the US supported and paid for the French war against Vietnam from 1945 to 1954. When the Vietnamese defeated the French, the US immediately launched a new effort against Vietnam, this time creating a new government in the southern part of Vietnam to prevent the re-unification of the country under Ho Chi Minh's leadership. And so began a new phase of the conflict. Vietnamese call this phase the American War.

With a history of conflict, how did the US and Vietnam finally achieve the good relations that we see today? One answer is of course the emergence of China as a global economic and diplomatic power. Both the US and Vietnam have reason to be apprehensive about what China will do in the important Pacific shipping lanes. But being afraid of the same thing rarely brings countries -- or people -- together. I believe that good relations between countries must begin with small steps taken by individual citizens -- to communicate, understand each other's perspectives, and move toward cooperation on areas of mutual interest. We have seen this work with Cuba and Iran, and much earlier with China and Russia. Sometimes it's two steps forward followed by one step back -- or even three steps back. Sometimes there are potholes; sometimes there are yawning craters. How has this process worked between the US and Vietnam? If we can understand how today's better relations were achieved, we might have a blueprint that could be applied to other conflict situations.

Let's step back from the big picture of countries and governments. Instead, let's look at examples of individual behavior. We call this people-to-people diplomacy.

As the Vietnam War ended in 1975, there began a multi-year flow of refugees from Vietnam to the US. Vietnamese who had worked with the US were

offered asylum, because their lives were in danger. Over the next two decades, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese moved to the US. Today there are more than a million Vietnamese living here. Nearly all are now American citizens. Many have served in the military and in government. Besides building new lives here, they communicate with friends and relatives in their former home. They describe life in the United States. This year's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "The Sympathizer," by Viet Thanh Nguyen, tells the story of Vietnamese building new lives in America and trying to hold on to their old lives at the same time.

Now let's look at the experience of one family. When Saigon was occupied by the North Vietnamese Army in 1975, the Do family began making plans to leave Vietnam. In 1976, with only two of their children old enough to travel, they sent them on a boat with a 13-year-old cousin and a group of adults. The boat sailed into the South China Sea and eventually landed on an island off the coast of Malaysia. When the adults began fighting over what to do, our friend Minh, then seven years old, traveled to the other side of the island with his cousin and older brother. Eventually, they were picked up by a refugee rescue organization. Through the efforts of a church group, the boys were placed in a foster home in Nebraska. The whole journey took nearly a year -- think of all the missed school!

A year later, the rest of the family was able to escape from Vietnam and the Do's were all reunited in St. Louis. Unable to continue working as teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Do started a tailoring business. On finishing high school, Minh made plans to attend the University of Missouri. One of his teachers asked the family if he could take Minh to visit a college back East that he had attended. Minh was given a full scholarship to Yale.

As he prepared to graduate from Yale, he and his friends began interviewing for jobs on Wall Street. Unlike his classmates, Minh wasn't receiving any call-backs after his initial interviews. When he told his friends, they asked, "What joke are you telling?"

"No joke at all," answered Minh. "Interviews are serious. I wouldn't tell jokes."

His friends explained that telling a joke was in fact the most important part of the interview -- showing the interviewer that you would be fun to work with. If the work is hard and the hours are long, at least there are jokes.

During the next interview, Minh told a joke. Soon he received a call-back, and was eventually offered a job. Once he began work, his boss asked him why he seemed so much more serious than the joke-teller they had interviewed. Minh explained, "Oh, I just told that joke to get a call-back. That's not what I'm like."

The boss realized that his company's recruiting process was flawed. Minh, their best new recruit, had been hired by accident. How many other talented people had they missed? Soon Minh was assigned to go on recruiting trips.

Several years later, my wife and I were planning one of our annual trips to Vietnam. We invited Minh to join us for his first trip back to Vietnam since his escape twenty years earlier. In Saigon -- now Ho Chi Minh City -- we found his old home and met a young man he had played with as a boy. Later we found his elementary school and the market where his family shopped. The next day, we visited a coffee plantation in the Central Highlands. Waiting at a bus station, Minh was noticed by two young women. To them, he looked like an American -- his clothes, our presence, his conversation with us. The young women assumed that Minh didn't understand Vietnamese. So they began talking about how cute he looked. As we left the station, Minh said hello to them in Vietnamese, nearly causing a meltdown.

After traveling with us for a few days, Minh left for a beach resort and then traveled north to Haiphong to visit relatives before returning to the US.

Over the next ten years, Minh visited Vietnam often and saw how rapidly the economy was developing. Soon people with his skills and experience in finance were in great demand. Back in New York, he took Vietnamese language classes to expand his vocabulary. Today he lives in Hanoi and is head of investments for a large Vietnamese company. He travels to NYC several times each year to meet his company's bankers and investors, and to raise funds to support the company's growth. He remains an American citizen; to the Vietnamese, he is known as "Viet Kieu," literally, overseas Vietnamese.

To his Vietnamese co-workers, Minh is an American -- impatient, demanding, critical of their English, and accustomed to doing things the way he learned while working on Wall Street. Yet he is prized as a boss for his skills and ability to help people grow in their jobs. In other words, like most bosses, a mixed bag.

If we multiply the experience of Minh times the million-plus other Vietnamese-Americans, we can imagine a network of connections between the US and Vietnam, invisible strands of family ties, friendships, and work relationships stretching between our two countries, pulling us year by year closer and closer together. This is people-to-people diplomacy. It is unplanned, uncoordinated, and uncontrolled by government agencies on either side. Yet I believe it is a powerful force, and that it will ultimately influence the course of relations between countries.

Here is another example. I left the war in 1967, but it was a long time before the war left me. As a soldier, I often said to my platoon-mates, "Someday we're all coming back here. We know what a beautiful country this is and how generous these people are. We'll want to see this country at peace." They disagreed. I thought it might be five years before I came back, maybe ten. My platoon mates said, "never."

I was wrong. It was 28 years before I returned to Vietnam. My friends were wrong, too. Many veterans have traveled back to Vietnam, some to visit and some to live and work there. On my first trip back to Vietnam in 1995, we visited the newly re-opened US consulate in Hanoi, as well as museums, parks and art galleries. We had lots of contact with Vietnamese people, who were eager to meet and talk with American visitors. On later trips, I met people starting and running technology companies. I spent a month in 1996 working for one of these companies. The next year I was asked by a Vietnamese government official to help organize a trip to the US for Vietnamese tech executives. They wanted to meet people in Silicon Valley. Whenever possible, I arranged for the group to be welcomed by Viet Kieu, former residents of Vietnam, so that the Vietnamese executives could see how well their former citizens were doing in the US.

In 1998, I took part in a bike ride that brought together Vietnamese and American veterans who had fought against each other during the war. The Vietnamese vets helped us understand how much war damage -- both human and environmental -- remained to be remediated. Sports Illustrated magazine made a documentary about this trip, called "Long Time Coming."

In Hanoi, I met an American vet who headed a project to remove unexploded bombs and artillery shells in Quang Tri Province so that the land could

once again be used by farmers. When I wrote a book about my experience as a foot soldier and visitor, the royalties went to this project.

Through this involvement, I gradually came to the view that the damage done by war had to be corrected wherever possible. I felt that I had both a responsibility and an opportunity to make amends for the suffering and destruction I caused by fighting in the war. Today I believe that healing the wounds of war in the country where it was fought, and healing the wounds of war in the soldiers who fought it, are inseparable from one another, two sides of the same coin.

Around the time I first returned to Vietnam, an American engineer, Ben Wilson, was sent by his company to build a factory in Da Nang, a large city on the coast of central Vietnam. Gaining approval from the government took a year. For the next two years, Ben managed the construction of the factory. In his Da Nang neighborhood, he saw children who were not in school, some living on the streets. Together with a Vietnamese social worker, Ms. Luong Thi Huong, he started a charity to help children and single-parent families. For the past 18 years, Children of Vietnam has been working with government agencies to help the kind of children Ben and Ms. Huong first met in their Da Nang neighborhood.

Who are these children? Some are children born with disabilities caused by their parents' or grand-parents' exposure to Agent Orange, a highly-toxic compound that was sprayed on forests by the US military to defoliate trees so that pilots could better see where to drop their bombs. Agent Orange, containing dioxin, seeped into lakes and streams and from there into fish and plants that were consumed by people. The American soldiers who handled Agent Orange experienced skin rashes and cancers. For the Vietnamese who ate the fish and plants contaminated by dioxin, the problems were much more severe and included birth defects for their children and grandchildren.

This is the type of continuing problem that should make it harder for Vietnam and the US to seek rapprochement. Instead, private US organizations are helping to clean up the 30 former military bases that were contaminated by Agent Orange. But the children born with birth defects require support throughout their lives. Providing this care is the mission of Children of Vietnam.

We find the families who are caring for these children. We set up case management teams that include government workers from the local departments of

health, education, labor, and invalid services. These teams stay in place as long as needed to help the family create a support plan for the children.

If you would like to see a film about one child born with disabilities caused by Agent Orange, watch this year's Oscar-nominated short documentary, "Chau, Beyond the Lines." As the film begins, young Chau is being cared for in a hospital with other severely disabled children. He is determined to become an artist. His caregivers remind him of how unlikely it is that he will succeed. In Vietnam, many art contests require participants to complete a painting in a period of hours. Chau works too slowly to succeed in these contests. Eventually, he learns to paint with his brush between his teeth. Today he is a successful artist and is living on his own. The film was made over an eight-year period by a young woman just out of film school at USC.

Because families with disabled children are unable to care for them while both parents work, these children are often placed in Agent Orange care centers. In other cases, one parent will try to start a home-based business.

We make micro-loans to mothers to help them set up businesses they can run while raising their children. Forty percent of each loan is forgiven; sixty percent is repaid to a fund that makes new loans.

Children of Vietnam also provides high school and college scholarships. We build kindergartens and turn them over to local governments to operate. At some kindergartens, we serve nutritious snacks twice a day to supplement the diet of young children. We support orphanages that are weekday boarding schools. And we inoculate children against parasites. Every program we operate requires government approval. We go further than just obtaining approval; we want government participation, so that our programs will be sustained.

This year, we will raise and spend about one million dollars on these programs. We raise money mostly in the US today. In the future, we believe we can also raise money in Vietnam, since successful companies are being created there. And many US companies are doing business in Vietnam. This year one of our sponsors was Hanes, which manufactures underwear in Vietnam.

Our local staff consists of nine Vietnamese people who plan and carry out these programs.

Each year, some of our donors join us on a trip to visit our program sites. This past March, we started in Da Nang on the coast, traveled inland to villages in the hills, then south to the coastal fishing village of Hoi An, and finally back to the City of Da Nang, where government officials welcomed us on the Dragon Bridge. Of course we stopped along the way for sightseeing and some wonderful meals. Some participants rode bikes, while others rode in a luxury bus with our Vietnamese staff providing commentary and explaining what we were seeing. After the service, I'll show some photos of this trip.

To what degree Children of Vietnam -- and other American organizations running similar programs -- have contributed to the new relationship between the US and Vietnam, I can only guess. While governments do not always do what their citizens want, it is rare for governments to do things that would be outrageously unpopular. Today, only a handful of Americans and Vietnamese are strongly opposed to what our two governments are doing together.

One final story. At the end of our meetings in Vietnam this year, the leaders of Da Nang's Department of Foreign Affairs invited us to join them for dinner. Guess what they wanted to talk about? Any guesses? If you were thinking "Donald Trump," you're right. "Tell us about Donald Trump," they asked. "And why does each state have its primary whenever it wants to? Why do some states have caucuses and others have primaries?" Whatever the subject, I am always grateful for dialog between people who share such a tortured history.