

IOWA VIEW | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Opinion: When Iowans represented the government in Indochina

Hailing from Mount Pleasant, Milton and Dubuque, envoys helped shape America's diplomatic involvement in the region.

Kenneth Quinn Guest columnist

Published 4:35 a.m. CT Dec. 28, 2021

One of my most rewarding experiences while serving on the staff of Gov. Robert Ray in the early 1980s was traveling across the state, speaking about Iowa's truly remarkable military history and the achievements of the Iowa National Guard.

I would tell my audiences that it can be instructive to recall the multiple conflicts that have involved Iowans, from the Mexican War of the 1840s that gave us such geographic reminders as Buena Vista, Cerro Gordo and Palo Alto counties, to the Civil War, World War I and World War II and the Vietnam War, all of which produced a long list of distinguished performances by an array of Iowa heroes and Medal of Honor recipients. At the same time, the wounds of the Vietnam conflict were still fresh and raw.

Now, four decades later, the relationship with both Vietnam and Cambodia has been remarkably transformed. As we observe the 175th anniversary of Iowa's statehood on Dec. 28, there is a little-known but interesting Iowa connection to America's 20th-century involvement in the Vietnam that contributed to that outcome that should be part of the historical record. Specifically, Iowans were at the forefront of the U.S. government's presence in Indochina, both at the beginning of the century and at the last days of the conclusion of the millennium.

While American naval personnel and a few daring travelers had visited the then-French colony of Indochina in the late 19th century, the very first American diplomat to ever represent our country in Vietnam was Jacob Elon Conner of Mount Pleasant, who arrived in Saigon in 1907 to assume duties as the U.S. Consul. Prior to that, the U.S. had local-resident Norwegian and French citizens serve as our commercial agent, whose role was to assist the occasional American ship and traders who might turn up.

Conner was an intriguing individual who had filled other Foreign Service assignments. While searching the National Archives, I found a copy of his 1908 report on business opportunities in Cambodia, but I was not able to determine whether he actually visited the country, which was also under French colonial administration. In 1909, Conner was transferred to St. Petersburg, Russia, a significant step up.

In a later New York Times article, Conner was identified as a graduate of Iowa State College. He subsequently earned a Ph.D. at the University of Iowa and spent later years on the faculty of Iowa Wesleyan College in Mount Pleasant. A prolific author, his books included "Uncle Sam Abroad," which aimed to inform Americans about the work of diplomats like himself; religious treatises about the life of Christ; and a 1923 volume that might have been a prescient commentary of America's future in Vietnam entitled "The Development of Belligerent Occupation."

Interestingly, as the 20th century drew to a close, I was one of the two Iowans holding the senior-most U.S. diplomatic positions in Indochina. Former prisoner of war Douglas "Pete" Peterson, who grew up in Milton, Iowa, was the first post war-envoy to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi. I, who had lived in Dubuque, was the American ambassador in Cambodia. We each led the process that would transform America's relationship with Indochina.

Both Pete and I had arrived in Vietnam in the 1960s when there were over 500,000 U.S. military personnel "in country." He was an Air Force pilot whose F-4 was shot down and he was captured in 1966. He spent the next six years as a POW. I became the only civilian to earn the Army Air Medal for flying combat helicopter missions in the Mekong Delta. After the war, I led the effort to attain as full an accounting as possible for all POW/MIAs who did not return. In this role, I got to know Pete and we became friends.

In 1995, when President Bill Clinton nominated Pete to be the first American ambassador to Hanoi, there was a small event in the Chief of Protocol's office at the State Department where he would take the oath of office. This would allow him to begin to be paid as he prepared for his confirmation process, which would be followed by a large formal swearing-in ceremony with hundreds of guests where the oath would be repeated.

My having worked so long and hard on re-establishing diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Vietnam, Pete asked me to go with him. As he prepared to take the oath from an assistant protocol officer, I said, "let me hold the Bible." It was a small but rather poignant moment for the two Iowans, from Milton and Dubuque, who would conclude the century-long epic

involvement that Jacob Elon Conner of Mount Pleasant had begun when he walked ashore in Saigon in 1907.

Kenneth Quinn is veteran diplomat and humanitarian.