

The first runner up
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More than just a trip!

Few people can recall what major national events happen when they are just five years old. Not me. I can still remember vividly the bright, flashy banners, the colorful flags, the frenetic media coverage and most of all, the joyous, cheerful happy atmosphere came in that spring of 1994. On that day, February 3rd, President Bill Clinton lifted the U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam, some 19 years after the end of the war in 1975. I didn't even know what "embargo" meant at that time, but I could just imagine what a momentous and pivotal day it was, because my mother just stared at the headlines and cried happy tears, along with thousands of other people on national television.

It was just the beginning of an end to "a decade of war and two decades of estrangement", a historic event that marked the day the first American Secretary of State, Warren Christopher visited Hanoi after 1975. It was the day two countries, bound together by the trauma of a lengthy, bloody war that cost nearly 60,000 American lives and millions of Vietnamese lives, turned from former enemy to emerging trade partners.

Since then, the two nations had been making real progress in reconciliation, economic development, cultural exchanges and military cooperation, to name just a few. On a hot summer day in 1995, another good news came in when President Bill Clinton announced the formal normalization of diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Five years later in November 2000, he became the first president to visit the country since Richard Nixon's 1969 trip to South Vietnam. I was a sixth grader at the time, a bit older to comprehend the affair and revel in the festive mood as president Clinton was welcomed with a red-carpet ceremony in the French-built presidential palace in Ba Dinh Square. I remember being one of the curious onlookers, standing on my toes, waving my hands in the air and trying to catch a glimpse of the president who as a young man, opposed and despised the Vietnam War...

I guess counting and reliving the number of times a significant American figure comes to Vietnam is a rather eccentric way to celebrate the friendship between two countries. But it is like that for me. After all, what can be more convincing, more believable, and more real than the historic moments that you can hear with your own ears, witness with your own eyes, and feel with your whole heart?

If I can choose my favorite moment, one would stand out and win hands down. It was 2006, when thousands of cheering Vietnamese students greeted richest man on earth, Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates with the sort of raucous adulation that can only be seen when a huge celebrity arrived. You could almost taste the excitement in the air. I was one of those high school and college students lined up outside the auditorium at the Hanoi University of Technology. Some of them even perched on trees and balconies; some swarmed the entourage, pushing against security barricades. It was one of the sweetest,

coolest, most awe-struck experiences in my life when I watched Mr.Gates deliver a speech on a big screen outside. I barely spoke English at that time, but I found it amusing and exciting as people listened with such rapt attention to what he said. The speech ended in thunderous applause. More than 10 years had passed since the normalization of diplomatic relations, and there I was, only a few hundreds of meters away from the most iconic figure in the United States, if not in the whole world, and I was overjoyed!

I could go on and tell you about President Bush's visit in the same year, or the approval of PNTR (Permanent Normal Trade Relations) for Vietnam in 2007, but I would like to end this on a musical note. This year marked Vietnam-US 15th anniversary, 15 years of healing, and as the saying goes "let the music heal your soul", I was fortunate enough to see the George Gershwin concert, a joint collaboration by the Vietnam National Symphony Orchestra and David Miller, Kevin Cole from the Albany Symphony Orchestra. The concert simply left me, just like everybody at the Opera house that night, spellbound, fascinated, mesmerized and wishing for more. I went home that night, feeling joyful and lucky to have attended it. And I couldn't help remembering back in 1995, when all the banners read "War is yesterday, hope is today"...

Happy 15th anniversary, and I guess I'm not the only optimist who is looking forward to more visits and more cooperation in the future...