



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Agent Orange and Addressing the Legacy of the War in Vietnam

Rotary Peace Conference, University of California/Berkeley
October 28-29, 2011

Keynote Speech
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The Aspen Institute

Thank you, Phuong Quach, for that fine introduction. Thank you everyone for joining us today here at the Clark Kerr Conference Center on the beautiful campus of the University of California at Berkeley. We are going to make Agent Orange history.

In 1997 I went to Vietnam and stayed there ten years heading Ford Foundation programs. It was then I saw the lingering legacy of Agent Orange. I learned that it is really true-- Wars don't end when the guns fall silent and when the last soldier leaves the battlefield. Wars cast a long shadow; they have a long tail. This is true of Agent Orange. I began to see what could be done about this long tail of war, and the answer is, "quite a bit." Now we can see it as a humanitarian concern that we can do something about. That is what brings us all here today.

The facts are quickly told. From 1961 to 1971, the American military sprayed 20 million gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicides over Vietnam with the intent to destroy food crops and clear away the forest. We used concentrations that were up to 50 times higher than the manufacturers had recommended. The herbicides killed everything—big trees, small trees, fruit trees, shrubs, grass, rice crops. By the end of the decade an area the size of Massachusetts was basically stripped of greenery and the land was reduced to moonscape. Maybe four million Vietnamese citizens were exposed to the spraying along with just about all of the 2.75 million American military personnel who passed through Vietnam during that time.

But that was not all. It turned out that Agent Orange was contaminated with a dangerous chemical called dioxin which is poisonous to people even in small concentrations. Exposure to dioxin shortens and reduces the quality of your life. It's associated with a long list of serious health conditions: various cancers, diabetes, skin and nerve disorders, birth defects and disabilities in later generations. And these conditions started turning up in both countries soon after the war ended.

Then the whole question of what to do about Agent Orange was caught for decades in a tangled web of geopolitics and scientific conflict: was it **really** Agent Orange? **Who** was responsible? **What** did various people know and **when** did they know it? And as a result, who should do what

for whom and when? This blame game solved nothing. It only delayed action, both here in the United States and in Vietnam.

In 1991 Congress said let's just take care of the problem. The Department of Veterans Affairs now provides disability benefits to U.S. Vietnam-era vets and their families who suffer from any of 15 listed conditions. In 2008 the V.A. paid out \$13.8 billion to Vietnam vets. But meanwhile we have done very little for the affected Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese Red Cross estimates that up to three million Vietnamese have suffered health effects from direct or indirect exposure to dioxin, both at the time and more recently. That includes about 150,000 of today's children.

Agent Orange—the herbicide itself—degraded quite quickly. But at the American military airbases where it was stored and handled, some of it spilled or leaked and soaked into the ground. Under those conditions, dioxin remains toxic for decades in soil and pond sediments, so fish and ducks have been taking it in ever since. And it has thus moved on up the food chain and reached people. Dioxin 'hot spots' are particularly a problem at three former U.S. airbases—Da Nang, Phu Cat and Bien Hoa.

Last August marked the 50th anniversary of the first use of Agent Orange in Vietnam. The harmful effects from our Agent Orange spraying are still being felt by millions in Vietnam, including children. A year ago CBS News correspondent Thuy Vu at KPIX in San Francisco visited Vietnam and filed this report.

Thuy Vu KPIX Channel 5/CBS News: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkbnFfldsOc>

So that's the legacy of Agent Orange in Vietnam. Now I'd like to tell you what is being done about it, and what is now possible.

In the past four years, a lot of progress has created a window of opportunity for a greater U.S. humanitarian effort. The cleanup is the easy part. We've done enough research and pilot work now so that we know how to make people safe. At Da Nang, the worst of the contaminated soils have been sealed off with a cement cap, and the rainwater runoff is now being filtered and contained. Fishing downstream of the airport has been halted and a tall fence separates the contaminated area from the nearby community. The unexploded ordinance that laced the contaminated soil has now been removed. Last October in Hanoi, Secretary Clinton announced U.S. government support for a complete cleanup of the dioxin at the Da Nang airport.

This is good news, and given the money, the U.S. government is committed to cleaning up the three principal dioxin hotspots and the public health risk they represent will be brought to an end. However we must not forget the deeper challenge-- how best to bring services and opportunities to people with disabilities and their families, especially those whose disabilities may have been caused by exposure to dioxin at some time in the past.

Many U.S. and Vietnamese non-governmental organizations, as well as individual donors, are providing that kind of help to families as well as adding to existing facilities so that families with children with disabilities can get services in their neighborhoods.

Over the last four years the U.S. Congress has appropriated some \$40 million, most of which is being allocated to clean up the dioxin at the Da Nang airport.

During this same period American foundations, foreign countries and UN agencies have invested \$39 million. These programs have benefitted more than 10,000 young Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese government has also spent money on cleanup, and gives its affected war veterans a small monthly subsidy of about \$17 per month. This totals about \$40 million each year.

But all these efforts together are meeting less than 10 percent of the need.

In 2007, a group of prominent scientists and citizens from both countries set up something called the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin. The convener of the Dialogue Group, Susan Berresford, its Vietnamese co-chairman, Ambassador Ngo Quang Xuan, and another member, Dr. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong, are here today. The Dialogue Group has brought clarity and prominence to this issue, pointed a way out of the bitter deadlock of the past, provided expert testimony before the Congress and continues to keep the Agent Orange issue in the public eye in this country. You will see a number of the sessions today are about the media. This is the Dialogue Group.

Last year the Dialogue Group drafted an affordable ten-year action plan to address this whole tragic legacy – particularly to clean up the dioxin hot spots, and to expand humanitarian services to people with disabilities and their families. The plan would do this at a cost of \$300 million over the next ten years, or just \$30 million a year.

We think the U.S. government should play a key role in providing that amount, along with other public and private donors, and an appropriate continuing investment from the government and the people of Vietnam.

But why should you get involved with Agent Orange? Why should you work to end this lingering legacy of the war in Vietnam? I think everyone will have their own reasons. I also think it's only fair that I tell you mine—the reasons that have kept me working on this issue, on and again beginning in 1998 and full time since 2007.

First, I believe that if you see a significant and serious social problem and have the opportunity and the means to end it, you have the obligation to act. You are obliged to act. There is no other choice. As the leader of the Ford Foundation's programs in Vietnam based in Hanoi I believed I had the means as well as some promising opportunities to do something about Agent Orange. In such circumstances I had no choice, I was obliged to act.

Second, I've been fortunate in life. My experience is that important things can get done, do get done, with a bit of persistence. I like to get things done and I can be quite persistent about it. Of course 11 years ago, when I first began working on Agent Orange, I had no idea it would take this long! Still, important things do get done with persistence and I am very optimistic that we will indeed make Agent Orange history.

Third, I am utterly and deeply convinced that Agent Orange is an urgent issue. Some people might say, after 50 years, what's the rush? It's gone on this long so it can go on as it has, a bit longer. Aren't there other things that are as important as dealing with Agent Orange, or even more important? My reply to this is yes, there are definitely other issues which challenge us on our planet. On the other hand, how can we live with the idea that it's OK for others and their families to live yet another difficult day? Disability knows no holidays, no weekends off. Let's not let this go on longer. We have the means to help Agent Orange victims live lives of dignity comfort and self-respect. Why wait another week, another month, another decade. If not now, when?

So these are my reasons: obligation, optimism and urgency. What might be some of yours? Last night, in the David Brower Center viewing Masako Sakata's gripping film we learned of other kinds of reasons to act—a family tragedy, profound and very private feelings which led to an extraordinary act of public witness, her film. We found from the questions people asked after the film that there are many reasons to be concerned but also to act.

For students- Here is an opportunity to apply what you're learning to help people and to have the satisfaction of mastering your chosen field of work. And Agent Orange is a problem with boundaries—a beginning and an end. The experience you gain here will be valuable to you later in your careers. At lunch you'll have the opportunity to mingle with the Viet Fellows—people in college or recently out of college who have gone to Vietnam as volunteers.

For Rotarians- Rotary is a large global network of people who care about others; your motto is "Service above Self." The Rotary International Foundation is partnering with the U.S. Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange to bring clean water to 220 households in a remote village in Vietnam—a village affected by Agent Orange. Your Rotaplast mission in San Francisco is exploring how to deepen its engagement with Vietnamese medical practitioners on cleft palate/cleft lip surgery. There are many other projects you do in Vietnam about which you are too modest. But I know that given the opportunity you can and will do more.

For Vietnamese-Americans- You among us, I believe, have a special opportunity and indeed a mandate to lead us out of this terrible lingering legacy. While recognizing and respecting the many sacrifices and deeply-held beliefs of older Vietnamese-Americans, it is time to look to the future in Vietnam and in America's relations with Vietnam. Your Vietnamese heritage gives you an insight into the culture of that country and what it means to help. That insight gives you a unique credibility in saying to other Americans, Agent Orange—let's fix this; it's a humanitarian concern we can do something about. Indeed I think we will only finally turn the corner on Agent Orange when Vietnamese-Americans speak up and say to our political leaders: Vietnam—it's an important country. Let's fix this now.

And finally let me address every American in this room— We Americans learn two things early in life: If you’ve made a mess, clean it up. And if you’ve unintentionally harmed someone else, try to make it right. Both these lessons apply here. All of us Americans should take this to heart.

I said earlier that it was urgent to act now on Agent Orange. At the same time I have to be realistic and recognize that it will take some more time to solve it—the Dialogue Group Plan of Action says it will take a decade to deal very substantially with the legacy of Agent Orange. The good news is we now have an opportunity that never existed before, we understand the boundaries of the problem as we never did before and we have the knowledge and the know-how for sure.

What we need are new workers, younger people to push this issue to a conclusion, to demonstrate conclusively that this is a humanitarian concern we can and are doing something about. Jon Funabiki kindly introduced me at the reception last night and at one point he asked people who know Charles Bailey to raise their hands. Most people there raised their hands. It was very gratifying to me, like I had hit “Bingo” in some kind of Facebook competition! But in fact, Agent Orange needs a new generation of leaders, lots of them. These leaders are you.

I will end my introduction to the conference with a second video. This one is by Active Voice, a non-profit group based in San Francisco. It’s available for your use from their website—MakeAgentOrangeHistory.org

Active Voice video www.MakeAgentOrangeHistory.org

So let us join together to end this long tail of the American War in Vietnam. This year—the 50th anniversary—is an historic moment. Join us in making Agent Orange history.

Thank you.