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***Agent Orange: Looking Forward***

Remarks Prepared for  
*Symposium on U.S.-Vietnam Relations: Look Back & Look Forward*  
in Honor of Professor Fred Brown, SAIS, Johns Hopkins University, USA

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Dear Ambassadors, Prof. Brown, Dr Tung and colleagues-

Thank you for this opportunity. The Academy was practically my first stop when I arrived in Hanoi in 1997 and it is a real pleasure to return. To answer Prof. Brown's question just now, the Ford Foundation invested about \$20 million through 110 grants in international relations in Vietnam over a 15 year period.

The grants funded study for the masters and PhD overseas for some 100 Vietnamese from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Academy, and other foreign policy agencies. A number of these students of course went to SAIS and I am delighted to see you here today. Other grants assisted the Academy in other areas including conferences.

I particularly want to mention the Academy's conference in October 2003 on "The Future of Relations between Vietnam and the United States" which Director-General Trinh Quang Thanh and Prof. Brown organized in Washington. The honest and often warm ambience of the conference demonstrated beyond doubt that both Vietnamese and Americans—official and unofficial—were determined to broaden and deepen the bilateral relationship. It was this mix of official and unofficial participants, and the skillful guidance of Ambassador Trinh Quang Thanh and Prof. Brown which permitted informal, friendly and frank discussion. We started with the easy part—the briskly growing trade between the two countries, went on to the somewhat more challenging—China and regional security—and ended up in the most challenging—the legacies of the war and especially Agent Orange.

At the time Agent Orange was still an extremely sensitive subject. The Vietnamese authorities and the U.S. government were literally poles apart on the impacts on the environment and on human health. But as one Vietnamese participant in the conference put it, "Like it or not, we have to talk about [Agent Orange] and deal with it, and recognize the fact that all cases come from people who lived in areas, or were related to people, affected by Agent Orange. This is an issue that must have a humanitarian solution." The Conference Report itself concluded that "Without waiting for any formal resolution, the U.S. Government should be more sensitive to the Vietnamese views on the Agent Orange issue."(Conference *Report*, p. 22)

The Conference thus helped set the stage for a turning point on Agent Orange—a joint statement by President George Bush and President Nguyen Minh Triet in November 2006. The statement acknowledged the benefits to be had from U.S. help with cleaning up the dioxin at former military storage sites in Vietnam. The statement created new possibilities; however it did not provide the practical and tangible means to move ahead.

There the matter might have remained but for two initiatives, one from a member of the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee, Senator Patrick Leahy and his staff member, Tim Rieser, and the other from the president of the Ford Foundation, Susan Berresford, and myself.

In December 2006 I approached Vice Minister Ambassador Le Van Bang, who invited us to continue the work we had begun in 2000 on Agent Orange. So we continued. We filled in the missing middle ground between the two poles with other actors-- local NGOs, international NGOs, 17 American foundations, UNDP, UNICEF and the governments of Ireland, the Netherlands, Greece and the Czech Republic.

Between 2000 and 2011, the Ford Foundation invested \$17.1 million in 82 grants for work on Agent Orange.

How were these funds used?

In Vietnam Ford grant recipients developed treatments and support services for Agent Orange victims; identified and began to clean up dioxin hotspots; and rebuilt rural livelihoods in areas that had been sprayed. These actions benefited over 10,000 Vietnamese in eight provinces.

In the U.S. Ford grantees engaged with policy makers in Washington and reached out to the American public, who were unaware that dioxin continues to be a significant problem for Vietnam. The American public and lawmakers now agree that “Agent Orange is a humanitarian concern we can do something about.”

And we helped launched a Track II process. Ton Nu Thi Ninh and Bui The Giang both participated in the 2003 Washington conference. In February 2007 they, together with Walter Isaacson, the president of the Aspen Institute, created the first genuinely free flowing, two-way channel between the U.S. and Vietnam on Agent Orange. It's called the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin. In 2010 the Dialogue Group released a Plan of Action which laid out what is needed to bring this legacy to an end.

Let me return now to Senator Leahy's leadership on this issue. Since 2007 the U.S. Congress has appropriated a total of \$131 million for Agent Orange in Vietnam. This breaks down to \$100 million for clean up of dioxin contaminated soils at the Da Nang and Bien Hoa airbases and \$31 million for health/disability services.

This Congressional funding, implemented by USAID, has already had a positive impact on the bilateral relationship. For example, after the ground breaking for the clean up of the Da Nang airport a Vietnamese friend said to me:

“With every decade that passed with no action, our hopes dwindled that anything would ever be done about Agent Orange. Now we see the U.S. government taking action. We think it helps turn us to a new page in our relationship.”

This is progress worth celebrating. The environmental clean up promotes further progress on what is the heart of the matter: a full response, to the extent possible, to the needs of people with disabilities linked to dioxin exposure—that is, to the Agent Orange victims. Senator Leahy and his Congressional colleagues have just presented us with a way to do this.

The Senator visited Da Nang last April for the ‘power up’ of the giant \$84 million furnace that is now busily destroying the dioxin on the airbase. In his speech he said:

“Today we are here to pay tribute to the joint United States –Vietnamese effort to address the legacy of Agent Orange... [Our goal is] to show that, after so many years, the United States did not ignore this problem. We returned and we are taking care of it... [Another goal is] to improve services for people with disabilities, regardless of the cause, including [those] which may have been caused by Agent Orange.”

You will notice the two uses of “cause” in that sentence. The first, “regardless of cause” represents the U.S. State Department’s position, which does not recognize a link between dioxin exposure and subsequent ill health and birth defects. The second usage in the same sentence is “services for people with disabilities...including [those] which may have been caused by Agent Orange.”

That was April 2014. In December the U.S. Congress approved the 2015 Appropriations Act and President Obama signed it into law. The Act contains two key passages on health/disability services and Agent Orange.

First:-

*“...funds appropriated under the heading ‘Development Assistance’ shall be made available for health/disability activities in areas sprayed with Agent Orange or otherwise contaminated with dioxin.”*

And second:-

*“[These funds] should prioritize assistance for individuals with severe upper or lower body mobility impairment and/or cognitive or developmental disabilities.”*

The Act thus makes it clear that the funds for health/disability services will need to be more tightly focused. Specifically, future American assistance for health/disability services should focus first and foremost on the people with severe physical and/or mental disabilities who live in areas that were sprayed with Agent Orange or in areas near dioxin hotspots.

Ladies and Gentlemen, people in our two countries and indeed people all over the world now know that Agent Orange is a humanitarian concern we can do something about. This Act helps us to better get on with that task. Now we need a new discussion between the governments of the U.S. and Vietnam and deft diplomacy on both sides.

From the American perspective, assistance channeled to this group could aim to assist everyone in the group, regardless of cause. American assistance to victims of unexploded ordinance has for many years helped everyone with a traumatic injury, whether or not it came from an unexploded bomb or some other cause. Assistance to people with severe disabilities would work the same way.

For the Vietnamese, the first concern is providing services to Agent Orange victims. Research now shows that a very large majority of Agent Orange victims are people with the conditions named in the Act: "severe upper or lower body mobility impairments and/or cognitive or developmental disabilities." Funds will always be limited in relation to the needs, but this focus ensures that the majority of the available American funding will go to help the people of greatest concern.

We now have the opportunity to finally close the gap that has bedeviled this subject for so long. This year— 2015— is the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations. It's a great year, and a great time to finish this job.

Thank you.