

# THE SCIENCE AND THE SPIRIT: SIMPLE JUSTICE FOR AGENT ORANGE

## VICTIMS IN VIETNAM

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### INTRODUCTION

History is open to interpretation. The human consequences of historical events often drive the interpretation. The American War has been the subject for many decades of global investigation and controversy. America's unprovoked invasion of Vietnam after assisting the French in an attempt to preserve their frustrated effort to defend colonialism; the installation of a dictator in the southern part of a fraudulently partitioned country; and the use of cluster bombs, napalm, and other weapons make fascinating intellectual debate. The debate, however, takes on a more somber mood when the victims of the imperialism represented by the war continue to march on the world stage to remind us that for millions the war did not end on 30 April 1975. A stark example of this is the enormity of those casualties from the use of chemicals during the war in Vietnam. (Herrmann, 2003)

This paper will provide a less than thorough empirical analysis of the issue. It, instead, will attempt to provide a human dimension to the debate and the dialectic

presented by the haunting evidence, the depersonalization attempted by some, and the reality of life with Agent Orange. The debate over this issue is startling.

Some see the effects of the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam during the American War as a complex series of the use of a herbicide (in fact, several different herbicides) gone wrong; an innocent and sincere attempt to protect American soldiers and to deprive their perceived enemies of both places to hide and food to eat during war; a morally neutral development and sale of a chemical called “dioxin”, involving about thirty American corporations dealing with the government in Washington; and inadvertent damage to those exposed to the chemical, resulting in unintended consequences.

The effects of Agent Orange in Vietnam during the American War might also be seen as a use of chemical warfare in violation of a number of international conventions and related agreements. It could be seen as the use of deadly dioxin by the American government with full knowledge of its implications, its inhumane consequences, and its insidious effects. It could be interpreted as a desperate attempt by Washington in collusion with US corporations to harm enemy combatants, innocent civilians, and the cause of Vietnamese liberation, even though one of the consequences was harming America’s own soldiers.

Observers might examine the science, politics, commerce, military tactics, and the historical variables associated with the American government’s decision to purchase and spray over 20,000,000 gallons of Agent Orange and other chemicals on at least 6,000,000 acres of Vietnam. (Kokkoris, 2005; Palmer, 2004). Many have explored this

effort to understand, some to assign responsibility, and still others to resolve what appear to be devastating and complicating effects for the Vietnamese. The professional experts, I suggest, are important in this effort to remediate a seeming injustice perpetrated on the Vietnamese, but they are not the only experts. They might help us with the empirical evidence and methods of improving a land saturated with deadly chemicals. They might even help us to avoid the continued disability of millions of people whose lives have been adversely affected because of the chemicals sprayed and dumped on large areas of the country. They, however, are not experts central to understanding the issue of Agent Orange in Vietnam. The central experts are the victims of Agent Orange, and an understanding of the issue may only be seen through the hearts and minds of these experts. A few of them live in an isolated mountain hamlet, not visited by many outsiders.

### THE SPIRIT

Thach lives in Que Lam hamlet, Que Son District, Quang Nam Province. She was five years old when the American War ended. The man she eventually married about fifteen years ago was twelve when the war ended. He was from Dien Ban, near My Son in Quang Nam Province. Their memories of the war were childhood memories, shrouded in the innocence of childhood and the fear, confusion, and chaos of adults attempting to cope with that which goes on during war.

Nguyen Thi Thach and her husband married with hope for a prosperous and peaceful future. He worked in the gold mine at Phuoc Son, with no knowledge of

the massive quantities of Agent Orange America had sprayed in that area. He drank the water and labored in the soil. The spraying over the Que Son, My Son, and Phuoc Son communities was not an issue that they understood. Their focus was making a living, sharing a relationship, and building a family. In 1992, their first child, Thang was born. This healthy little girl brought them joy, a happiness that both of their families shared. In 1997, their son Tung was born. He suffered severe developmental disabilities. In 2000, their daughter Vy was born. She was severely disabled, failed to physically develop, and was unable to communicate, move, or relate to others. Tung and Vy spent their days and nights lying next to each other, unable to develop normally, unable to gain weight, and unable to communicate with others. As only a caring mother can relate, she seemed to sense their pain and discomfort. They communicated with their hearts and feelings, a sensitivity often lost when examining a problem with objective scientific evidence and data.

Five years ago, Thach's husband died in a traffic accident. Since his family was unwilling to continue to assist Thach and her three children, she returned to rural Que Lam Hamlet, where her elderly and sick mother still lived on the banks of the Song Thu Bon in the mountains. Thach gathered fire wood to support her children; lived in a small shack; and desperately tried to provide food, clothing, and a home for the children she loved. Thang, a bright and caring child, began but stopped going to school. She had to watch her disabled brother and sister while her mother worked.

Thach heard of the work being done both to provide some aid to Agent Orange disabled children and their families and to communicate to Americans the suffering these victims endured. I received her letter in May 2004:

To: Prof. Kenneth Herrmann, Director

SUNY Brockport Vietnam Program

I am writing this letter in response to the appeal you made in the Thanh Nien Newspaper on May 24, 2004.

My name is Nguyen Thi Thach and I was born in 1970. I am living in Que Lam, Que Son, Quang Nam. I was born and raised up in the area where the US troops had dumped lots of chemicals. We were not aware of the effects of these deadly chemicals. So we continued to eat and drink all of the contaminated vegetables and water. Since then, I have begun having diarrhea, headaches, dizziness, ulcerous skin, and arthritis.

My parent was also affected by AO and he passed away at early age. I married in 1991. My first daughter, Nguyen Thi Thang, was born in 1992. She is a normal and healthy kid. My second son, Nguyen Son Tung, was born in 1997. His head is very soft, he has seizures all the time, and his muscles are atrophying. He cannot recognize anyone or anything. My third child, Nguyen Thi Vy, was born on July 10, 2000. She is experiencing the same symptoms as her brother.

My family life is very difficult now. My hope is that my letter will be read by humanitarian organizations and caring individuals.

Prof. Herrmann, please forward my letter to the companies that produced Agent Orange. Tell them that they must assume the responsibilities for what they have caused to my family and millions of other Vietnamese families.

Thank you.

Nguyen Thi Thach

She writes to ask that those responsible for the development and use of Agent Orange know of her plight, her children's pain, and the "millions of other Vietnamese families" with similar experiences. Her concern was not merely her family but also her fellow Vietnamese.

Little Vy died in January 2005. Neighbors made a coffin and buried her tiny, emaciated body near the small, dilapidated shack that served as the family home. Thach reported that Tung seemed to respond in small ways when he would lie next to his little sister at night. These ended when Vy died and were replaced by slight, plaintiff moans. Almost unnoticed seizures began. Recurrent bleeding from his ears began, and frequent fevers began. The family had little food, no cooking pans, and no blankets for the cold mountain nights. The wind would blow through the holes in the walls of their one-room house, and the rain would turn the dirt floor to mud, as

Thach and her young daughter desperately tried to help themselves and Tung survive.

One has the feeling that Vy's spirit brings Tung, her sister, and her mother some comfort in a situation that has seemed filled with little more than tragedy and hopelessness.

Tung was taken recently to a hospital in Tam Ky because of his increased hemorrhaging and a growing severity of his seizures. He was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The Danang/Quang Nam Fund, a small US NGO, had provided repairs for their home, food, clothing, and some money to allow the mother to care for Tung while Thang returned to school. The three of them traveled to the hospital in Tam Ky. The NGO agreed to assist with medical care.

The doctors spoke of brain surgery but finally concluded that Tung's severe disabilities and fragile condition precluded an operation on his brain tumor. They traveled back to their mountain hamlet to continue their daily struggle, to share their love for each other, and to await the certainty of Tung joining his tiny sister Vy. It was interesting after the NGO gave the mother some money before they had left Tam Ky for the journey home. Thach asked her daughter if she would like to have new clothes, a first for the child. Thang began to cry. Her mother asked her why she was crying when offered new clothes. Thang said, "I don't want you to use my brother's medicine money for my clothes." The child had mistakenly thought the

money was intended for Tung's drugs. The selflessness of a young girl expressed the love of a family.

Thach's family is one of millions. The issue of Agent Orange, however, is the issue of Nguyen Thi Thach and her family. The science is in the investigation of the deadly consequences afflicting Vy and Tung. The economics are in the profits made by the corporations who developed and marketed the chemical. The politics are in the decisions made in Washington to invade Vietnam and to use Agent Orange over millions of acres of land and millions of unknowing victims. The military science is in the tactic of using a deadly herbicide without regard for collateral damage, damage that continues into a third generation. The responsibility is frustrated by the American government's refusal to admit any connection between today's human misery and the use of Agent Orange, American corporations who claim no liability for how Agent Orange was used by the US military, and untenable decisions made by US government officials many years after the spraying ended. I will explain this later.

The answers to these issues, however, might be found by merely visiting Que Lam and the hamlet's children. The answers are also found in the nearly 4,000 letters sent to me from other families. These victims, in addition, raise haunting questions.

A few of these represent the thousands that were received and the tens of thousands never written ([www.danangquangnamfund.org](http://www.danangquangnamfund.org)):

Nam Dinh, June 02, 2004

To: SUNY Brockport Vietnam Program

*This letter is from a woman in a rural village in North Vietnam.*

Before April 1975, my husband fought in the Liberation Army in South Eastern Vietnam. He was affected Agent Orange during this time.

We married after he came back from the war. We have three children who are also affected by Agent Orange. All three of them are paralyzed. They cannot do anything by themselves. I have to be around to provide 24-hour care.

Although we are receiving care and assistance from the local government, this still is not enough to recover from this endless pain.

I suggest that your program send these letters to the US president, the Americans, and the company producing this deadly agent. They must be aware of our on-going pain and should officially apologize my people and compensate for what they have caused in my country.

Thank you.

Bui Thi Bon

(Her husband fought against America's invasion. Their reward was having three paralyzed children and "endless pain".)

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To: Prof. Kenneth Herrmann, Director

SUNY Brockport Vietnam Program

I am writing this letter in response to the appeal you made in the Thanh Nien Newspaper on May 24, 2004.

My name is Ho Van Xanh. I was born in 1936 in Phuoc Son, Hiep Duc, Quang Nam. I am from an ethnic minority group. During the war between the US and Vietnam, I saw the US helicopters dumping Agent Orange onto my hometown. Right after that all of the plants and vegetables were killed. I am an ethnic minority group so I spent all of my life in the mountainous area. I ate vegetables and drank water from this area.

I have had arthritis since 1975. It is getting worse over time.

My granddaughter was born in 2002. When she was born she had little black moles on her skin. Over time, these black spots have gotten much bigger. They cover the right side of her body, are on her face, legs and arms, and are still spreading. On these black areas she is also growing fur similar to an animal.

**Thank you.**

**Ho Van Xanh**

**(This three-year old little girl has a future of cancer and a short life filled with pain, poverty, and tears but with a family whose strength is obvious.)**

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**Le Quang Chon**

**Trinh Nga Hamlet, Hoang Trinh Commune**

**Hoang Hoa District, Thanh Hoa Province**

**Viet Nam**

**Professor Kenneth Herrmann**

**Director of the SUNY Brockport Vietnam Program**

**I am Le Quang Chon. I am 54 years old.**

**I would like to present my family's circumstances.**

**I joined the Vietnamese People's Army and fought at the Tay Nguyen**

**Battlefield for national independence.**

I have been infected with Agent Orange used by the U.S Army in Viet Nam. In consequence of this, my wife has had three monsters in three pregnancies followed by three disabled children:

- Le Thi Thoa: Congenitally amputated.
- Le Quang Chien: disabled and deformed.
- Le Quang Chuong: disabled left leg (cannot move).

The photos of our three children are attached to this letter.

For me, I have been infected directly with Agent Orange: poor eyesight, losing most of my lower jaw's teeth, 2 loose teeth, often getting ill, gastrectomy of 3/4 of stomach, gangrene of 40 cm of intestine, rheumatic limbs, neurasthenia.

My wife is in panic when seeing such husband and children.

Therefore, she gets mental disease. Sometimes, she does not know what she is doing. My family has too many difficulties in both material and spiritual life. My family's members have suffered from the effects of the Agent Orange. Therefore, we have to speak up in order that the world people know the Agent Orange victims' losses, caused by the American Imperialists.

Yours,

Le Quang Chon

(“Monsters” is a common term for children born with grotesque and severely disfiguring disabilities, resulting in death at or shortly after birth. This family’s exposure to Agent Orange carries a message to those who find it difficult to understand the enormity of this violation of even basic standards of human decency.)

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Dear Prof. Kenneth Herrmann,

My name is Tran Thi Lanh. I was born and raised in Trieu Phong, Quang Tri. This area was mercilessly destroyed by chemical warfare during the American war.

My daughter is two years old but she cannot speak or sit up. Her head is getting bigger while her muscles are getting smaller. Our life is very difficult. We have to live off of my parents and my neighbors.

I know that you are collecting letters from across Vietnam. I hope that my daughter will be another proof to illustrate the disastrous effects of the AO the American soldiers used during the war.

Thank you.

Tran Thi Lanh

(This two-year-old little girl and her family illustrate the certain future of death and anguish from the use of herbicides during the war. This mother describes an all too common situation.)

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Saigon, June 7, 2004

Dear Mr. Kenneth Herrmann,

My name is Phan Phuoc Trung and I am 55 years old.

My wife's name is To Thi Dieu and she is 50 years old.

I was very touched to read the appeal that you made in the newspaper. The article came to me like an angel's arrival to save the lives of millions of AO victims in my country.

We, the AO victims in Vietnam, really appreciate your concern for us. The war has been over for almost 30 years. The Americans have begun to forget about us while millions of the Vietnamese people are still living with its disastrous effects. It is a tragedy. There are millions of Vietnamese families who are living with persistent pain caused by the American troops during the war. There are many families that are affected into the third generation. We still have no idea when AO will

stop affecting the health and safety of my innocent people. It may affect the fourth and fifth generations. The list may be longer.

Dioxin still exists in the soil we cultivate, the water we drink, and the food we eat. This means that it still exists within each Vietnamese citizen

The US government has admitted the effect of AO on the American troops who served in the Vietnam War. The Nam vets have been compensated. It is unjust with the AO victims.

All of the Vietnamese AO victims have been living in silence. They are lonely coping with their pains and losses. The company producing this deadly agent must be responsible for this. It is time for us to share with you our pains

Yes, I am going to share with you the story of my family. My wife and I were born and raised in Hue. We married and had five healthy and good-looking children before we moved to Ninh Son, Ninh Thuan Province in 1994. By the end of 1995, our daughter named Phan Thi My Lien was born. We were miserable to know that Lien had a cleft lip and that her head was flat. She is nine years old now, but she cannot walk, cannot speak, and cannot recognize anything. She weighs ten kilos (22 pounds). We were very nervous and were told that the place where we were living was heavily sprayed with AO during the American War. We immediately sold our house and moved to a

different place. A couple of years ago, I came back to this place to visit my neighbors. I discovered that the family who had bought my house also gave birth to a disabled child. Their son is mentally retarded. I also learned that the midwife who helped with Lien's arrival also had two disabled children. Both of them had died. In addition to this, there are many disabled children in this area.

I just shared with you the story about my family. This is just one of millions of stories about AO victims in Vietnam. Please communicate to any people you know about how deadly this agent is.

Many thanks.

Phan Phuoc Trung

(This articulate letter notes that “Americans have begun to forget us”. The millions of victims this parent describes and the plight of their own child are a daily reminder for many Vietnamese about how the American government has responded to its use of Agent Orange and the legacy it has given these people.)

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Truc Ninh, Nam Dinh, May 31, 2004

Dear Professor Kenneth Herrmann,

I would like to tell you the story about my family. My father came from a poor family. He joined the Liberation Army in November 1969 and became a tank driver. He traveled across Southern Vietnam. He came back home in September 1975, rejoined the army in September 1987, and came back home shortly after that. He then married my mother. A year after my parents were married, my sister, Nguyen Thi Xuan, was born. When she was 5 days old, she began to have seizures. My parents sent her to many hospitals in the area but it did not help. She was paralyzed. My mother had to stop working to provide care to my sister.

Two years later I was born. The same symptoms occurred; half of my body was paralyzed. Life became more difficult.

When my father was 46 years old, he was diagnosed with cancer and passed away shortly after that. All the family's belongings were sold for his medication and treatment.

My mother became a single mother with two disabled children when she was 38 years old. It has been 23 years. My mother has heart disease but she has to work very hard for us.

I am luckier than my sister is. I am a tailor. Nevertheless, I still find it hard to integrate into the community. People seem to ignore me and make fun of my disability.

I have attached a picture of my sister. I wish you good health.

Thanks.

Nguyen Thi Vien

(This woman's disability and those suffered by her family because of Agent Orange speak to the isolation, loneliness, and sadness, which have become their existence, the existence of millions.)

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Letter from Nguyen Thi Hong - Trung Nam, Que Trung, Que Son,  
Quang Nam, Viet Nam

Que Trung, June 30, 2004

Dear Prof. Kenneth Herrmann,

The war has been over for almost 30 years. However, its disastrous effects are still there in every corner of Viet Nam. It is heartbreaking to think about the large amounts of dioxin that was sprayed by American troops from 1964 to 1975.

I was born during the time American troops were spraying dioxin. My name is Nguyen Thi Hong and I was born in 1955. I currently live in

Trung Nam hamlet, Que Trung commune, Que Son district, Quang Nam Province.

I was a common resident who was living in the area where American troops sprayed dioxin. At that time the weather became increasingly hot and famine was widespread. However, both the food and water were badly contaminated. Regardless of the spraying, we drank the water without paying any attention to its pungent smell. We also ignored side effects such as headaches and dizziness. I didn't think about the long-term effects.

I gave birth to my only child in 1995. Her name is Nguyen Thi Thuy Van. Unfortunately, she suffered from malnourishment. She did not recognize any movements until she was two years old. In addition to her mental state, she also has an inborn heart defect; this serious disease is always life-threatening.

Since this time our economic condition has dramatically gotten worse. I have been spiritually devastated knowing that my only child is in danger. As a widow, I don't know what to do to help my daughter. It is most miserable to know that the poisonous water I drank when I was young is the cause of her disease. The poison has passed from my genes to hers.

I am very glad to read about your appeals. I write this letter with the hope that you will help us. Ask the American Government and Dioxin manufacturers to be responsible for these disastrous effects.

My family as well as millions of Vietnamese Agent Orange victims is very grateful for your concern and kindness. I wish you great health.

(This woman's childhood in the hell of war has continued into another generation.)

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July 21<sup>st</sup> 2004

Dear Prof. Kenneth Herrmann,

With reference to your article titled "Vietnamese AO victims need to say" in Labour newspaper, I write this letter to share our situation with you and your program.

In the war from 1964 to 1975, my husband was a driver in the army. He was stationed at A Sau, A Luoi.

We had had two normal children (one son, one daughter) before he joined in the South battlefield. However, after coming back from the war we had one more child in 1980. Unfortunately, she was abnormal.

She's only 13 kilos weight, keeps crying days and nights. I went to have her cured, but it was useless because the doctors all said that she was born mentally retarded. She was blind, paralyzed. She realized nothing about the world around her. I was so sad to know that dioxin from her father's body had passed to hers causing her diseases.

Now she is 25 years old, but she is only a child. She knows nothing except crying. I have to help her with everything in her daily activities. My family, therefore, meets with too many difficulties.

As far as I am concerned, you and the "SUNY Brockport Vietnam" program want to aid AO victims. I write this letter with the hope that you will help us to partly compensate for the great losses that were caused by American troops in the war.

Finally, I wish you and your colleagues health and success.

Many thanks!

Nguyen Thi Cam Bao

102 D4 Dich Vong Cau Giay

Ha Noi

(This mother describes a life filled with tears caused by America's orange rain.)

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Tho Thanh, date 10 July 2004

Dear Prof. Kenneth Herrmann, director of SUNY Brockport Vietnam Program

My family are AO victims.

My Professor, I am Nguyen Quynh Loc, born in 19(?). I joined army at the battlefield of South since 1972. At 1977 I went North. After I had completed my mission, I came back and got married.

We has three children. The eldest daughter is Nguyen Thi Huong Giang, born in 1988. She has a nervous disease.

The second is a boy. Nguyen Minh Phu, born 1990. He has no arm.

The last son is Nguyen Duc Tho, born in 1993. He has myasthenia, get worse in nutrition, grow difficulty.

I myself am a 4/4 wounded soldier. I have wounded skull, three spine joint was damaged. 75% of stomach was cut. My liver, my spleen, kidney and bladder was disabled and damaged because of the AO effect. Specially my second child Nguyen Minh Phu. He now is 14 and studying in 6<sup>th</sup> class level. He study hard and well. But I am

worried that he often have headache, be dazzled. He sleeps all day. He has carbuncles everywhere in his body, specially on his feet and arms.

We are very poor. My wife is weak, but she has to nourish her sick husband, disabled children. So we can't live as normal and the children can't go school. We have invited to Hanoi by the newspaper television station VTV5 to make the "Family Maker" program. The children were taken care of by the Government and leaders of organizations. Phu has attended the generalizing congress of Vietnam Red Cross, and AO Victims Fund.

My family wrote to you respectfully, my Director. Please compose call humans for help. Our family need your help very much.

Minh Phu's father,

Nguyen Quynh Loc

Tam Hop Village, Tho Thanh, Yen Thanh, Nghe An province

(Another family representing the pervasive harm caused to body, mind, spirit, and culture.)

These are merely a few of those whose challenges appear to result from many atrocities committed by nations opposed to the reunification and liberation of Vietnam. A unique atrocity continues to cause often-indescribable pain. One mother stated, “We have continued to cry orange tears since the war.” Confronted by insurmountable disabilities, unable to join in the economic progress of their nation, prevented from what seems an inevitable consequence of the invaders’ willingness to win at any cost, many ascribe their situation to be a result of fate. Many harbor no hatred for Americans but a perspective that fate caused exposure to these deadly chemicals.

The courage and heroism of the victims and their families cannot be emphasized enough. Each day is filled with a lack of hope; reminders, in many cases, that their family ancestry will end with their death; a struggle providing the necessities of life; and an acceptance of their plight. There are many more people in Vietnam and across the globe each day, however, who are beginning to be involved in replacing tears with smiles and hopelessness with hope.

There is a spirit of perseverance, dedication to family, and commitment to responsibility illustrated by all of the families afflicted by Agent Orange whom I have met. This is congruent with Vietnamese culture, but it is also an example of integrity from which we all can benefit. This lesson is taught within the context of what America did to this small nation and what it continues to do.

## THE SCIENCE

While Agent Orange is named after the orange stripe on the 55-gallon metal drums in which it was shipped, there were also other herbicides used by the Americans during the war. (NIEHS News, 2001) This insidious rainbow of colors included Agent White, Agent Green, Agent Purple, and Agent Pink, each based on a different compound of 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T, each containing dioxin. Americans sprayed them in Vietnam from 1962 to 1971. The Saigon regime used the toxins supplied by America until the end of the war in 1975. (Kokoris, 13)

The term Agent Orange came to be a generic reference for all such herbicides used. “The amounts of 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD) contaminant in Agent Orange and other herbicides sprayed during the Vietnam War are up to four times greater than previous estimates” (prior to research reported in 2003 in the now well-known article in Nature Magazine by Jeanne Mager Stellman, professor of clinical health policy and management, and Steven D. Stellman, professor of clinical epidemiology, and others, co-lead investigators at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University). “The equivalent of about 600 kg of pure TCDD was sprayed and spilled in Vietnam during the war, in contrast to the 170 kg widely reported, according to Wayne Dwernychuk, senior vice president of Hatfield Consultants in Vancouver. (Hileman, 2003; Stellman, 2003)

These were sprayed for general defoliation, grassy plant control, rice destruction, crop destruction, and forest defoliation. (Institute of Medicine, 1994) The related effects of the chemicals, however, were no mystery to Washington.

In a classified and confidential report submitted to Secretary Derwinski of the Department of Veterans Affairs on May 5, 1990, Admiral E.R. Zumwalt, Jr., who was acting as a Special Assistant to the Secretary concluded that the US corporations that manufactured Agent Orange not only knew that the herbicide was dangerous but actually falsified their research in an attempt to show the chemical less dangerous than they knew it was. He notes in the report, “DOW Chemical, a manufacturer of Agent Orange, was aware as early as 1964 that TCDD was a byproduct of the manufacturing process. According to Dow’s then medical director, Dr. Benjamin Holder, extreme exposure to dioxins could result in ‘general organ toxicity’ as well as ‘psychopathological’ and ‘other systemic’ problems.” The report states Dow knew of the threat to humans posed by Agent Orange years before the American military build-up in Vietnam. It also makes note of US government agencies’ (like the CDC) research conducted on the dangers posed to humans by Agent Orange in such a manner that the research was planned, controlled, and completed in a manner that would make Agent Orange appear harmless.

The Zumwalt report cited above notes, “dioxin is regarded as one of the most toxic chemicals known to man.” (Zumwalt, 1990) Dioxin has sometimes been referred to as the deadliest chemical known at the time of its development. President John F. Kennedy initially authorized its use in Vietnam. (Kokoris, 13) Eventually, the US Ambassador was given the authority to continue its use. Newspaper articles criticized its use. Congressman Robert W. Kastenmeier urged discontinuing the use of herbicides in Vietnam. The Washington Post published an editorial, urging

discontinuing their use. In 1967, Dr. Arthur W. Galston, often referred to as the man who discovered dioxin in 1943, joined with other scientists to plead with Washington not to use Agent Orange in Vietnam. (Lambeck, 2005) The Federation of American Scientists, members of the National Academy of Sciences, seventeen Nobel laureates, the RAND Corporation, and others urged terminating this form of chemical warfare; in fact, in 1969, United Nations Resolution No. 2603-A declared that the use of chemical agents in a manner used by America in Vietnam was a violation of the 1925 Geneva Protocol, a war crime. The UN General Assembly passed this Resolution. Washington voted against the resolution which passed by a vote of 80 to 3. (Kokoris, 17)

After President Johnson assumed the presidency, he ordered an increase in the use of herbicides. President Nixon was warned by Dr. Lee DuBridge about a National Institute of Health study about a connection between the herbicides we were spraying across Vietnam causing “stillbirths and malformations in mice. Yet by 1970, 200,000 gallons a month of Agent Orange were being used in Vietnam.....Defense Secretary Melvin Laird considered curtailing the use of such herbicides, but General Creighton Abrams, commander in Vietnam, and his boss, Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, as well as Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reaffirmed the necessity for its use.” (Currey, 1992)

During the years American soldiers fought in Vietnam, they, too, were exposed to Agent Orange. Over 400,000 have since been tested for health problems relating in

some manner to this exposure. The American government pays compensation to veterans of the American war with the presumption that Agent Orange contributed to the development of the following medical conditions (Veterans Benefits Agency, 2006; Environmental Health Perspectives, 1995):

- Chloracne or other acneform disease consistent with chloracne. (Must occur within one year of exposure to Agent Orange).
- Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia
- Diabetes Mellitus, Type II
- Hodgkin's disease.
- Multiple myeloma.
- Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.
- Acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy. (For purposes of this section, the term acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy means temporary peripheral neuropathy that appears within weeks or months of exposure to an herbicide agent and resolves within two years of the date of onset.)
- Porphyria cutanea tarda. (Must occur within one year of exposure to Agent Orange).
- Prostate cancer.
- Respiratory cancers (cancer of the lung, bronchus, larynx, or trachea).
- Soft-tissue sarcoma (other than osteosarcoma, chondrosarcoma, Kaposi's sarcoma, or mesothelioma).

These veterans will receive between \$112.00 and \$2,393 each month, depending on the degree of disability. (Veterans Benefits Agency, 2006) Many others were

compensated from a settled lawsuit brought by American veterans against chemical corporations, which developed Agent Orange. (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2004)

The American government still refuses to assume any responsibility for the victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam. It even refuses to accept research findings that conclude there is a severe problem in Vietnam, resulting from the millions of gallons of dioxin sprayed and dumped on that nation and its people. (Griffiths, 2003). American soldiers typically spent one year fighting in Vietnam. Many were exposed to spraying once or twice during their tour of duty. Some were more exposed than others, especially those doing the spraying. Others might have moved through a former triple canopy jungle become an area of dead foliage after defoliation. Millions of Vietnamese were similarly sprayed but never left, eating food from the soil, fish from lakes and rivers, and coping with the enduring effects on them and their children for decades. Washington's refusal to admit this contradiction in recognition and denial of responsibility goes beyond insult.

“Amid great publicity in 2001, the US government announced the beginning of an era of cooperation in researching the connection between Agent Orange and the millions of disabled in Vietnam.” (Herrmann, 2005). It appeared a new era of assumed accountability was beginning. American and Vietnamese scientists were to cooperate in a scientific investigation that held the promise of help for children like Tung and their families. After a few years of negotiating protocols and process, a

decision by the US National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences terminated the research effort on January 1, 2005 before it had begun. (Herrmann, 2005) In addition to shattering hopes, this decision added insult to injury. This, however, was not the only such decision.

A lawsuit on behalf of Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange was filed by volunteering US attorneys in a US District Court to require US corporations to provide some remediation for the damages suffered in Vietnam. The judge assigned to the case was the same judge who presided over the US Vietnam veterans' lawsuit settled in the 1980s against the thirty American corporations, which manufactured Agent Orange. The Judge dismissed the lawsuit which sought assistance for the Vietnamese. His decision found no evidence between Agent Orange exposure and the disabilities suffered by the Vietnamese. This seemingly incoherent decision is being appealed. (Kokkoris, 2005; Herrmann, 2005; Buffalo, 2005)

The government in America has three parts: executive, legislative, and judicial. All three frequently function by providing a check and balance on each other. At the present time, however, all three branches of government agree with DOW Chemical and its fellow corporations, either Agent Orange is relatively harmless or the disabilities suffered by the Vietnamese have no connection with Agent Orange, but those suffered by American veterans do. They apparently conclude the people from

these two countries belong to different species and respond to dioxin in different ways.

Tung and the other children and their families continue to wait. They continue to suffer in a desperate attempt to survive until tomorrow. Their tomorrow might be their yesterday, but it might be a new world of hope. Is this fate or a blatant disregard for human rights and simple justice by the American government and American corporations?

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The dangers of dioxin are well known to the scientific community. (Dwernychuk, 2005). It is classified, with special comment about Agent Orange by the World Health Organization, as a major cancer causing substance. (WHO, 1999). A variety of research studies suggest a direct link between health problems and exposure to dioxin and the chemical known as Agent Orange. Some of these studies have been conducted without collaboration between the scientists from many nations. They usually come to the same conclusions, however. It would be useful to bring together these scientists to represent an effort to advocate for increased cooperation by the American government and by the United Nations. International cooperation in the emerging avian flu threat is an example of how such cooperation might proceed.

Avian flu is an important future health crisis. The effects of Agent Orange are a present and continuing health crisis.

Past prohibitions by the American government made assistance for the disabled in Vietnam difficult. They found themselves facing “obstacles...by various agencies of the US government acting on orders of successive American presidents; Ford, Carter, Reagan, and Bush – they have all obstinately refused to allow direct aid or shipment of goods to Vietnam.” (Currey, 1992). Aid organizations now operate relatively freely. NGOs and other private sector aid efforts in Vietnam often operate in a focused yet individual approach. While their forms of aid (medical care, education, direct aid, housing, etc.) may be specialized with a concern for assisting with such specialized needs, their aid is usually related to problems experienced by an identified client system. Broadening though networking among aid organizations operating in Vietnam, with a view toward assisting Agent Orange victims, might increase both the amount of aid provided these persons and also broaden the scope of such aid, including an ongoing cooperative approach to aid provision with such organizations as the Vietnam Red Cross, Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange Association, and other Vietnamese organizations. This partnership and cooperative networking may provide an improved comprehensive approach to services for Agent Orange victims.

Advocacy for these victims in America has increased over the last few years. Such efforts must increase to involve politicians and professionals from many fields in America. The SUNY Brockport Vietnam Program has continued to use one approach since 2000 in bringing American university students into direct contact with Agent Orange victims in Danang and in Quang Nam Province. (SUNY, 2006) Their eighteen weeks of service to these victims provides not merely an educational experience but also the opportunity to provide aid and assistance. In addition, they bring their newfound knowledge and their commitment back to America. Other international volunteer and international education programs exist throughout Vietnam. Some are longer and most are shorter than the time spent by the SUNY Brockport students. It would be useful for the cooperating or sponsoring Vietnamese organization that works cooperatively with these foreign programs to urge involvement in helping the victims of Agent Orange, as well as urging advocacy on their behalf once the students return to their home countries.

The American government's denial of responsibility for the damage done to Vietnam and its people by using unprecedented amounts of chemicals during the war in vast areas of Vietnam might be framed as a human rights violation for indiscriminately using weapons of mass destruction in a manner that injured non-combatants during the war and continuing these injuries to this day. The involvement of human rights organizations across the globe in an effort to pressure the US government to remediate the problems they knowingly caused is a reasonable approach by concerned organizations. If America's government is a government of the people, by

the people, and for the people, an American public might finally end the embarrassment America experiences around the world while it wages war because of non-existing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq while it denies the use of chemical warfare in Vietnam. This effort to create advocacy based on human rights principles, therefore, might have a special focus in sensitizing an American public.

Tourism is an important and productive industry in Vietnam and promises to become even more important for the national economy. While some tours include visits to a Friendship Village or similar services, tourists often do not visit with the purpose of meeting Agent Orange victims; however, urging tour guides, tour agents, and hotels to include written materials for foreign guests would assist in broadening the awareness of the millions each year who come to enjoy and explore Vietnam. These materials might merely take the form of a small brochure developed by VAVA or similar organizations.

The effort by the government of Vietnam and concerned Vietnamese to assist Agent Orange victims, of course will continue and expand, as resources become available.

## CONCLUSION

The yin and yang, the purposeful effort of the government of Vietnam and the often mysterious and always challenging conditions faced by Agent Orange victims and their environment, present a context in which Vietnam and its people have an opportunity to emerge once again from an overwhelming ordeal.

“Both systems theory and the metaphor of yin and yang remind us to keep our attention firmly directed toward the emerging context and not be distracted by fixation upon ephemeral details of content and form except as they relate to and form a part of that context...It is the context that evolves. This is the deepest lesson of Vietnam” (Jamieson, 1993, p. 376). The struggle for liberation from foreign imperialism has been won by Vietnam. It now faces the challenge of seeking liberation from the vestiges of imperialism. If history teaches us anything, we know with certainty that the Vietnamese will someday look back at Agent Orange as a painful chapter in its history but a chapter in which the strength of its people provided ability over disability.

Tung and the millions of other little victims of Agent Orange are teachers. They teach not only their fellow Vietnamese a valuable lesson but the people of the world about the context of perseverance, courage, strength, and love.

I thank them for this lesson.



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