

Cowboys vs. Indians: Racial Stereotyping and Agent Orange

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ABSTRACT

At the time of the first Earth Day, in the spring of 1970, the United States was pouring dioxin (as an active ingredient of Agent Orange) on the jungles of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, in an attempt to defoliate the jungles and deny Viet Cong insurgents places to hide from aerial bombing. The guerillas were said to be “fish” in a “sea” of rural peoples that would be stripped bare of vegetative cover by defoliants. Between 1962 and 1971, at least 12 per cent of southern Vietnam’s land area was doused liberally with nearly 18 million gallons of 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin, the most potent of dioxin’s many varieties. As pilots joked that they were “Cowboys” to the Vietnamese “Indians, “United States armed forces dropped more bombs (measured by weight) on Vietnam than it dropped in the entire Pacific Theater during World War II. By 1971, more than 600 pounds of bombs per person had been rained on Vietnam. Between 12 per cent (U.S. figure) and 43 per cent (a National Liberation Front figure) of South Vietnam’s land area was sprayed at least once with defoliants, usually Agent Orange. Before it was called Operation Ranch Hand, the dioxin-spraying campaign had been known as Operation Hades.

INTRODUCTION

Given a half-century of after-effects, that may have been more appropriate. The dioxin was sprayed not only on jungles, but also on farms in parts of South Vietnam that were controlled by the National Liberation Front, a deliberate attempt to cripple food production ^[1]. Many farmers were exposed to very high levels of the toxic herbicide. Denial of dioxin’s effects was widespread ^[2]. According to an approving history of Project Ranch Hand, “Herbicide scientist EJ Kraus (who invented dioxin) needed to prove the safety of his herbicide to humans, so he ingested half a gram of 2,4-D daily for three weeks” ^[3]. Eighteen million gallons of Agent Orange were sprayed over vast tracts of Southeast Asian forests between 1962 and 1971 in concentrations up to 1,000 times as potent as dioxin-based herbicides now sold over the counter in the United States ^[4]. Large areas of the countryside became unfit for human habitation during the war, and for several years thereafter. As non-combatants fled poisoned, de-foliated, and bombed-out rural areas, the population of Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City, increased ten-fold between 1954 (when the war began with French intervention) and 1970, from 300,000 to 3 million people. Agent Orange was only one of several herbicides that the U.S. armed forces used to soak Vietnam’s jungles in a toxic bath, but its horrendous effects on everyone who was exposed have made it the most infamous. Chemical companies could have made Agent Orange safer, but changing manufacturing methods would have reduced profits. At the time, no one warned troops (much less Vietnamese victims) of its long-range effects. Some troops even used 55-gallon barrels of Agent Orange as showers ^[5]. Soldiers sometimes used the empty 55-gallon drums as BBQ pits, as residue soaked into their food. The United States distributed films “showing civilians happily applying herbicides to their skin and passing through defoliated areas without concern. One prominent comic strip featured a character named Brother Nam, who explained that ‘The only effect of defoliant is to kill trees and force leaves to wither, and normally does not cause harm to people, livestock, land, or the drinking water of our compatriots” ^[6].

Monster Babies

Most of the herbicides, including Agent Orange, were applied without prior hazard testing. Agent Orange was applied in large amounts, often haphazardly, by troops taking part in “Operation Ranch Hand,” whose participants proclaimed that “Only we can prevent forests,” an allusion to the U.S. Forest Service’s Smokey the Bear’s slogan, “Only you can prevent forest fires. Samples collected between 1970 and 1973 documented elevated levels of TCDD in milk samples, as well as in fish and shrimp. Nursing mothers who had been heavy consumers of fish were found to have the highest levels in their blood. Soon after spraying of Agent Orange and other herbicides began during the late 1960s, reports increased of deformed births in unusually large numbers. Ar-

eas sprayed with Agent Orange later reported very high incidences of certain birth defects: anencephaly (absence of all or parts of the brain), spina bifida (a malformed vertebral column), and hydrocephaly (swelling of the skull).

The Saigon newspaper Tin Sang published descriptions of “monster babies” born to mothers in areas that had been sprayed. The newspaper reported that one woman “reported that her newly pregnant daughter was caught in a chemical strike, and fainted, with blood coming out from her mouth and nostrils, and later from her vulva. She was taken to a hospital where she was later delivered of a deformed fetus. The same day (October 26, 1969), Dong Nai, another Saigon newspaper, published a photograph of a stillborn fetus with a duck-like face and an abnormally twisted stomach. A day later, the newspaper reported that a woman in the Tan An district who had been soaked with Agent Orange had given birth to a baby with two heads, three arms, and twenty fingers. Many other similar accounts were published before the South Vietnamese government shut down the newspapers for “interfering with the war effort”. The South Vietnam health ministry also began to classify accounts of deformed births as state secrets. When these accounts were presented to U.S. Department of Defense officials, they were, at first, dismissed as unconfirmed enemy propaganda. When the accounts persisted and began more specific and numerous, the United States armed forces finally stopped using Agent Orange. The U.S. Air Force later found a “significant and potentially meaningful” relationship between diabetes and bloodstream levels of dioxins in its ongoing study of people who worked with the defoliant Agent Orange during the Vietnam war [7,8]. Members of the U.S. armed services who were exposed to high levels of dioxins were found to be more prone to development of diabetes compared to those with lower levels of exposure. People with the highest exposure levels developed diabetes most rapidly. While it once dismissed reports of cancers caused by Agent Orange as groundless, three decades later the U.S. Army was giving a special medallion the Order of the Silver Rose to soldiers who have been afflicted. Philip Jones Griffiths’s photographic account, Agent Orange: “Collateral Damage”: in Vietnam is a wrenching reminder of Agent Orange’s human toll. Even 50 years later, Viet Thanh Nguyen and Richard Hughes described the generational legacy of Agent Orange in Vietnamese orphanages: Phan Thanh Hung Duc, 20, lies immobile and silent, his midsection covered haphazardly by a white shirt with an ornate Cambodian temple design. His mouth is agape and his chest thrusts upward, his hands and feet locked in gnarled deformity. He appears to be frozen in agony. He is one of the thousands of Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange. Pham Thi Phuong Khanh, 21, is another such patient. She quietly pulls a towel over her face as a visitor to the Peace Village ward in Tu Du Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, starts to take a picture of her enlarged, hydrocephalic head. Like Mr. Hung Duc, Ms. Khanh is believed to be a victim of Operation Ranch Hand, the United States military’s effort during the Vietnam War to deprive the enemy of cover and food by spraying defoliants Pham Van Truc is another Vietnamese victim of Agent Orange. With his crippled, birdlike limbs and patches of scaly skin Perhaps Ms. Khanh does not want strangers to stare at her. Perhaps she feels ashamed. But if she does feel shame, why is it that those who should do not?

Agent Orange and Risk of Diseases

By mid-2001, the U.S. federal Department of Veterans Affairs was soliciting applications or compensation from Vietnam veterans with any of a large number of “presumptive disabilities:” chloracne, Hodgkin’s disease, multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, soft-tissue sarcoma, acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy, spina bifida, and prostate cancer. The same request for claims asserted that diabetes mellitus soon would be included in its list of dioxin-induced pathologies. The diseases that the U.S. Veterans Administration (VA) has recognized as associated with Agent Orange exposure expanded during the 1990s. To include: chloracne (a skin disorder), porphyria cutanea tarda, acute or subacute peripheral neuropathy (a nerve disorder), type 2 diabetes, and numerous cancers [non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, soft tissue sarcoma, Hodgkin’s disease, multiple myeloma, prostate cancer, and respiratory cancers (including cancers of the lung, larynx, trachea, and bronchus)]. The VA is in the process of adding chronic lymphocytic leukemia to this list (Environmental Agents, n.d.). Vietnamese people who were exposed to Agent Orange (and their offspring) probably suffer from at least as many ailments as U.S. veterans, although a complete tally has never been undertaken. Agent Orange “hotspots” in Vietnam have been described by Wayne Dwernychuk. At roughly the same time, a panel advising the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, well stocked with industry representatives, was still arguing whether dioxin should be classified as carcinogenic for human beings. After ten years of work, during the summer of 2000, the E.P.A. released a 3,000-plus page Draft Dioxin Reassessment (E.P.A., 2000), which concluded that “TCDD (and possibly other closely related structural analogs, such as the chlorinated didenzofurans) are carcinogenic in humans and can cause immune-system alterations; reproductive, developmental, and nervous system effects; endocrine disruption, altered lipid metabolism; liver damage; and skin lesions”. The E.P.A. study confirmed many other studies that had linked TCDD and other forms of dioxin to “cancer and cancer mortality at relatively high levels in chemical workers and in toxicity studies” [9-13]. About 50,000 American veterans won \$180 million in an out-of court settlement over Agent Orange’s effects, but many were never able to collect because the chemical’s effects are long-term and often cannot be attributed to meet strict legal standards. Legal testimony indicates that the U.S. federal government and its manufacturer were well aware of Agent Orange’s effects. The program ended three years before U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. “Beginning in the mid-1970s,” wrote Richard Alan-Leach in Z Magazine (2000), “Vietnam veterans who had sprayed the chemical began to complain of bronchitis, irregular heartbeat, nervous disorders, thyroid disorders, immune-deficiency diseases, liver and prostate cancers, and reproductive abnormalities of the kind that are now rife among the South Vietnamese. In 2010, after decades of pressure from veterans’ groups, the Department of Veterans Affairs added 14 diseases that could be attributed to Agent Orange-related diseases to its compensation list, as Congress allocated up to \$13.3 billion for treatment and compensation. Only \$12 million was allocated for treatment in Vietnam, a pittance against the need. Effects

of the chemicals sprayed on Vietnam have been spreading since the spraying stopped. "Canadian scientists located a heavily-defoliated valley located in the Central Highlands," wrote Alan-Leach. Testing Vietnam's soil for dioxin residues, they found high rates of birth defects, deformities, and cancer. These maladies have been steadily increasing since the mid-1970s. Children living near the former U.S. military base at Bien Hoa have dioxin levels 50 times higher than children in Hanoi. Today, in South Vietnam, new generations of children continue to be born with spinal deformities, severe retardation, cerebral palsy, cleft palate, cataracts, club feet, and extra fingers or toes.

Effects on Succeeding Generations

Men who sprayed Agent Orange in Vietnam between 1962 and 1971 were followed to determine whether exposure to dioxin affected their children. Nervous-system disorders were found to be widespread. Spontaneous abortions, birth defects, and developmental delays also were noted – paradoxically, men who received low doses of dioxin tended to give birth to more children with these problems than those who had been exposed at higher levels (Wolfe, ^[14]). Newspaper reports more than 40 years later indicated that medical problems had been passed down to U.S. veterans' children and grandchildren ^[15]. Dioxin levels remained very high for several decades in some areas of Vietnam that had been sprayed with Agent Orange more than three decades earlier ^[16]. Tests of people in the city of Bien Hoa, (population 390,000), about 20 miles north of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), in particular, showed dioxin readings 135 times higher than levels in Hanoi, which was not sprayed. Levels in Hanoi were measured at 2 to 3 parts per billion TCDD (roughly background level in today's world) while blood levels of 271 p.p.b. were found in the blood of people living in Bien Hoa. The research of Arnold Schecter (an environmental scientist at the University of Texas School of Public Health) and colleagues clearly indicated how residents of Bien Hoa -some of whom had not been born during the war continued to acquire contamination. The dioxin first dumped in the area by U.S. armed forces was bio-accumulating up the food chain, from phytoplankton to zooplankton, and then to fish consumed by people.

Human Effects on Vietnamese Children Decades Later

Thanh Xuan, a "peace village" near Hanoi housed a hundred children who are retarded, some with stunted limbs or twisted spines. Most arrived at the "peace village" unable to walk, speak or read. Across Vietnam, rates of birth defects, miscarriages and other complications were still uncommonly high almost three decades after spraying of Agent Orange ended during 1971. Many of the deformed children in the "peace village" were born to parents who were sprayed during the war. "If I wasn't here, I don't know what I would do," lamented Nguyen Kim Thoa, 15, sitting in her bedroom beneath a Britney Spears poster. A reporter described Thoa's delicate features, "wrapped in a shroud of spongy skin tumors and charcoal splotches sprouting bristles" ^[17]. "I wasn't able to go to school at home," Thoa said. "The children always made fun of me. In their eyes, I was a freak. Here, I have friends and teachers who love me". Thoa's father served in the Vietnamese Army between 1978 and 1980 along the Cambodian border, an area that was heavily sprayed during the war. Hoang Dinh Cau, chairman of a national Vietnamese panel that investigates the war's ongoing health consequences, estimates that about 1 million Vietnamese people have been afflicted with dioxin poisoning, including 150,000 children. Thirty years after the war, some rice paddies that were abandoned after spraying have not been reclaimed, as "soaring forests with 1,000 different tree species shriveled, replaced by weedy meadows that livestock won't graze. Farmers call the new growth 'American grass'. In a sparsely decorated bedroom of a two-story concrete building, Bui Dinh Bi recalled his days with communist forces in Quang Tri, in what was then called South Vietnam. During the early 1970s, after he was exposed to Agent Orange, Bui's skin lesions changed from mosquito-bite-like bumps to tumors of a type that covered his body thirty years later. Bui and his wife had eight children. The first was stillborn, and then the next five died in infancy. Their two surviving children are mentally retarded ^[18]. Bui lived with 29 other veterans and 70 children in Friendship Village, near Hanoi, one of about a dozen similar communities that the Vietnamese government has established veterans and children afflicted with dioxin toxicity.

The Washington Post reported in April, 2000 that "Canadian researchers have found high levels of dioxins in children (who) were born long after the spraying ceased in 1971. The lingering contamination is so severe in some areas that if they were in the United States, they would be declared Superfund sites, requiring an immediate cleanup effort". About \$100 million allocated by Congress for environmental cleansing of Vietnam's Da Nang airport, only one of 28 "hot spots" that were contaminated in Vietnam (the chemicals were stored there). Only \$20 million was allocated for victims' care in that country, a pittance against the need, considering that "Vietnamese soldiers, from both sides, with perfectly healthy children before going to fight, came home and sired offspring with deformities and horrific illnesses; villages repeatedly sprayed have exceptionally high birth-deformity rates".

Environmental Racism and Agent Orange: Context

The environmental justice movement in the United States was taking shape in the 1970s, recognizing that racism had forced peoples of color to endure a major portion of the world's environmental toxic burden. This burden extended to areas such as Vietnam, where U.S. armed forces subjected the lands and peoples to toxic exposure by Agent Orange. In addition, the troops who were drafted into the Vietnam war (especially those who served in front line combat included a higher ratio of Latino and Blacks than the general population, so they were more likely to suffer exposure to Agent Orange. Many of these troops had been involuntarily drafted, and perceived their service as an extension of home-front racism. As they served, many inner cities were convulsed by civil-rights demonstrations that doubled as anti-war rallies, and veterans of color often were chosen to lead the

marches. As Herman Graham suggested in *The Brother's Vietnam War*, the fact that the rate of African-American casualties was disproportionately higher than their draft eligibility was not lost on them, and after Muhammed Ali refused his draft notice, fewer and fewer African-American men saw service in the army as an acceptable means toward achieving equality and social justice at home ^[19]. Stereotyping the Vietnamese as “Indians” allowed dehumanization that led even the top leaders of the Army, such as General William Westmoreland, to think of the Vietnamese as less than human, and to regularly imagine Americans as “placing higher value on human life than (the Vietnamese)”. Just as repugnant, but perhaps more pertinent, given the environmental justice movement’s roots in social justice for indigenous people,” commented Charles Waugh “was the ubiquitous equation of the war effort with playing cowboys and Indians.” Michael Yellow Bird asserted that: ‘During the Vietnam War the United States often thought of Vietnam in images of the American West and cast the Vietnamese in the role of Indians. It was common for American soldiers to refer to enemy territory (free-fire zones) as ‘Indian Country’ and for American soldiers to brutally massacre Vietnamese while fantasizing they were killing Indians.’”

The terminology of the program even summoned up images of the Old West – Ranch Hand an another program, Trail Dust, “which employed jeep mounted and smaller, backpack sized spray apparatuses for defoliation missions on the ground. Thinking of themselves as cowboys helped them establish a rationale for the mission: not only were they cleaning up “the ranch” by removing unwanted vegetation, they were taming the wild, assisting in the eradication of the “Indian” and the “Indian country” all at once ^[20]. To this day, some veterans of Ranch Hand still call each other “Cowboys.” Yellow Bird illustrated racist Vietnamese-Indian associations with a reference to the March 16, 1968 massacre at My Lai, citing testimony by Robert Johnson at Congressional War Crimes Hearings during April, 1971. Rep. Patsy Mink asked him: “You made a statement that in your opinion the My Lai massacre was the inevitable consequence of certain policies. Would you specify what policy you make reference to with regard to the killing of POWs?” Johnson replied, “First, the underlying rational policy, that is, that the only good gook is a dead gook. Very similar to the only good Indian is a dead Indian and the only good nigger is a dead nigger. William Calley, who was convicted for the massacre at My Lai, wrote in his memoir, *Body Count*, that: “We weren’t in My Lai to kill human beings, really. We were there to kill ideology that is carried by—I don’t know. Pawns. Blobs. Pieces of flesh. And I wasn’t in My Lai to destroy intelligent men. I was there to destroy an intangible idea. To destroy communism I looked at communism as a southerner looks at a Negro, supposedly. It’s evil It’s bad” ^[21]. Likewise, as they dumped Agent Orange on Vietnam, pilots de-humanized the Vietnamese as the Ranch Hand program sprayed more than 19 million gallons of dioxin-laced herbicides on the land and people of Vietnam – environmental racism, ipso facto. And, by extension to the general context of environmental racism and justice, as Waugh observed, “saying what the environmental justice movement has maintained all along, that the system of industrial capitalism in the United States has co-evolved with several forms of institutionalized racism, so that the two are at their historic cores inseparable”. The Ranch Hand program reached its height in Vietnam just as the United States was celebrating its first Earth Day and President Richard Nixon, a supporter of the war, was signing the enabling legislation for the Environmental Protection Agency. “The American war in Vietnam, after all, was not only the first declared war on the environment, but also the world’s first planned ecocide, in which entire ecosystems were targeted and destroyed”. “More than 40 years on,” wrote Jason Von Meding in *Salon* during 2017, “the impact on their health has been staggering”. “This dispersion of Agent Orange over a vast area of central and south Vietnam poisoned the soil, river systems, lakes and rice paddies of Vietnam, enabling toxic chemicals to enter the food chain”. Some locations were sprayed three or four times. Effects intensified as time passed. The most evidence health problem at first (for both Vietnamese people and American soldiers was several forms of cancer. “But then,” wrote Von Meding ^[22-24].

The children were born. It is estimated that, in total, tens of thousands of people have suffered serious birth defects - spina bifida, cerebral palsy, physical and intellectual disabilities and missing or deformed limbs. Because the effects of the chemical are passed from one generation to the next, Agent Orange is now debilitating its third and fourth generation. Prof. Arno Mayer of Harvard, wrote that, "If crop destruction efforts are successful, they constitute a war measure primarily, if not exclusively, directed at children, the elderly, and pregnant and lactating women". Because dioxin is very difficult to erase from the food chain, many agricultural areas remain toxic a half-century after they were sprayed ^[25].

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