

**Building Trust in US-Vietnam Relations:  
The Issue of Agent Orange**

**Statement of Catharin E. Dalpino  
Visiting Associate Professor, Southeast Asian Studies  
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service  
Georgetown University**

**United States House of Representatives  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs,  
Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment**

**Hearing on “Our Forgotten Responsibility: What Can  
We Do to Help Victims of Agent Orange?”**

**May 15, 2008**

Thank you for this invitation to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss the legacy of the wartime use of Agent Orange and its continuing impact on the people of Vietnam and the United States, and on US-Vietnam relations. My views on this subject are informed by my work as Visiting Associate Professor of Southeast Asian politics, security and international relations at Georgetown University, and as Director of The Aspen Institute Advocacy and Exchange Program on Agent Orange/Dioxin. The latter seeks to educate Americans on the urgency of the Agent Orange issue and to promote dialogue –between the United States and Vietnam and within the United States - on its resolution. I also serve as President of the Board of Directors of the War Legacies Project, a Vermont-based non-governmental organization working to develop a fuller accounting of the costs of war and to connect people who suffer from its effects with those who can mitigate that suffering. The views expressed in my testimony today are my own, and not necessarily of these institutions.

My training is in political science, and I will therefore focus my testimony on the impact of Agent Orange on US-Vietnam relations. My colleagues on the panel who are physical scientists and medical professionals are better able to assess the precise impact – on human health and the environment – that dioxin has exerted and continues to exert in Vietnam. However, many of us have stood on the runway of the Da Nang airport and seen how the herbicides spilled there during the war have blistered the tarmac. We have spoken with farmers living on the perimeter of former U.S. military bases who lost their livelihood when dioxin in the soil and water contaminated their livestock. And we have visited provinces with continued high levels of dioxin where families – and even entire villages – have been impoverished by the need

to care for an alarming percentage of people with profound physical and cognitive disabilities. The ravages of Agent Orange in Vietnam are evident enough to the layperson.

### Agent Orange in the US-Vietnam Relationship

Over the past two decades, reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam has been a double-edged sword: each country has had to manage intense domestic issues related to the damage of a tragic war while it has attempted to find accord with its former adversary. In the process of normalization, domestic dynamics have often been as important as –and at times have even overshadowed – foreign policy issues in the bilateral negotiation process.

The impact of Agent Orange is a potent domestic driver in both Vietnam and the United States because it is an ongoing and even future problem, given the suspected link between high levels of exposure and birth defects. Moreover, in Vietnam contamination is ongoing in those areas where dioxin continues to leech into the soil and water. However, the issue of Agent Orange has only been broached in the official US-Vietnam relationship in the past few years.

In Vietnam, the environmental damage caused by Agent Orange was evident before the war had ended, but realization of the full impact of dioxin on human health was slower to unfold, particularly with regard to birth defects. A parallel process was taking place in the United States and led to class action litigation by veterans groups against the US manufacturers of Agent Orange in 1978, which was settled out of court in 1984. Payments were also made to military personnel from Australia and New Zealand in the suit.

Identification of Vietnamese suffering medical and other problems from dioxin exposure was a more complicated process, because the pool of possible victims was much larger, and because attention to Agent Orange victims had to be balanced with relief for other war sufferers, such as those who had been injured by landmines. Moreover, US victims of dioxin exposure were easier to isolate, since they were largely confined to Vietnam War veterans and their families. In addition to their own veterans, Vietnam was also faced with millions of civilians who had been exposed to dioxin because their provinces had been sprayed.

In each country, as health problems related to dioxin exposure became apparent the government was under pressure to provide some degree of relief. The US Veterans administration currently provides medical services to Vietnam veterans for eleven disorders believed to be linked to dioxin exposure. The descendants of veterans exposed to Agent Orange are also allowed services to treat spinal bifida. Veterans groups have complained that many are not receiving the services promised, and that coverage for children is particularly inadequate. In Vietnam, people who are classified as suffering from the effects of exposure to Agent Orange receive approximately \$50 per year in assistance. The government struggles to provide them with some services in institutional programs, many of which are maintained with donor aid.

Vietnam and the United States wrestled with the domestic problems presented by Agent Orange in isolation of one another during the first two decades after the war. When negotiations on normalization commenced and the two countries embarked upon a “roadmap” to diplomatic

recognition, humanitarian assistance to remediate the impact of Agent Orange in Vietnam was not on the table. However, accounting for US prisoners of war/missing in action (POW/MIA) was a centerpiece of the plan. Indeed, US-Vietnam cooperation in this area has been a mainstay of the relationship for more than twenty years.

During the normalization period the issue of Agent Orange in Vietnam was tacitly pushed aside. Although the issue is increasingly considered to be a humanitarian one, it was often viewed through an ideological lens in the years immediately following the war. Both governments were inclined to avoid issues that might derail the normalization process.

With US-Vietnam diplomatic relations established in the mid-1990's and full trade relations completed earlier in this decade, the tenor of the bilateral relationship is rapidly changing. The normalization "roadmap" prescribed a linear relationship, in which progress was measured according to established benchmarks. However, the relationship has expanded into a busy agenda of policy issues that play out simultaneously, sometimes reinforcing one another and sometimes seeming to contradict one another.

Moreover, the number of actors has increased exponentially. Philanthropic groups, non-governmental organizations and corporations all play a growing role in the relationship, and public opinion is given greater weight by both governments. As one indication of this phenomenon, at the beginning of the decade the most prominent American to visit Vietnam was President Bill Clinton. More recently, it has been Bill Gates.

### New Opportunities – And Imperatives - To Resolve An Old Problem

Despite the present flowering of US-Vietnam relations, war legacy issues still have resonance – and present significant problems – in both countries. Paradoxically, to continue moving forward in the relationship, it is important to look back to these issues and make a conscious and concerted effort to address them. There are several compelling reasons for the United States to work with Vietnam to remediate the impact of Agent Orange in this new era:

1. The growing importance of US-Vietnam relations in US policy toward Southeast Asia. With its high literacy rates and its spectacular growth rates, Vietnam's economic development has thrust it into the international spotlight as a new economic "superstar." US-Vietnam trade has quadrupled in this decade, and the United States is now Vietnam's largest trading partner. Less spectacular but equally important is the emerging US-Vietnam security relationship. Security ties will proceed at a more cautious and incremental pace, but the Pentagon has expressed its clear interest in expanding the bilateral security dialogue.
2. The need to strengthen trust between the two countries as the relationship expands. US-Vietnam relations may be fully "normal," but a certain amount of wariness remains between former adversaries. Expansion into new policy areas – particularly security – will require building greater trust between the two countries. Increasingly, Vietnamese are inclined to see issues such as Agent

Orange as a litmus test of US intentions and reliability as a partner, not least because the United States has placed such emphasis on accounting for its own POW/MIA's. Vietnam is not expecting a direct *quid pro quo*, but they are looking for an indication that the United States takes Vietnamese needs – as well as US interests – into account in the relationship. If the United States increases cooperation with Vietnam on Agent Orange, there may not be immediate links to other policy issues, but it may well improve the overall policy environment.

3. The growing power of Vietnamese public opinion on Agent Orange. In recent years, Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange have become more visible to the Vietnamese public. Popular artists often perform charity concerts for their benefit. The class action lawsuit in US Federal Court brought by the Vietnamese Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA) against American manufacturers of herbicides has boosted the profile of the issue enormously in Vietnam. To date, the lawsuit was rejected in the lower court and has been turned down on appeal. Without visible efforts from the United States to lessen the damage caused by Agent Orange, the Vietnamese public may easily come to view this issue as a clear negative in the bilateral relationship. In an era when the United States is concerned about a drop in its “soft power” abroad, it is difficult to fathom why Washington does not view assistance to address Agent Orange as an asset to its public diplomacy policy in Vietnam.

### Initial Steps Toward Partnership on Agent Orange

In the post-normalization period, the US Government has been reluctant to enter into cooperation on Agent Orange with Vietnam. In the face of growing Vietnamese public awareness of this issue, and growing pressure from US scientific and humanitarian groups, in 2002 Washington acceded to a Vietnam-US Joint Advisory Committee. Shortly thereafter the two countries attempted to launch a joint research project on dioxin, which foundered when the two sides could not agree on a number of issues. One more positive activity in this period was the provision of technical equipment and expertise on analyzing soil samples from the Environmental Protection Agency. The EPA also co-funded, with the Ford Foundation, an assessment of cost-effective measures to contain the dioxin at the Da Nang airport. Overall, however, these early efforts to cooperate were discouraging.

In the past three years, however, a series of events have created a modest upturn in this policy area. For the first time, joint statements following US-Vietnam Summits, one in Washington and one in Hanoi, mentioned cooperation between the two countries on dioxin. The 2006 report of the Appropriations Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee included language recommending a small pot of funds for the remediation of Agent Orange in Vietnam. In 2007, the first earmark of funds, in the amount of \$3 million, was appropriated and plans are in train for a 2009 earmark that could be slightly higher.

This new, if modest, momentum has also sparked public-private partnerships and a Track Two process to forge cooperation on Agent Orange between Vietnamese and American non-

governmental actors. In 2007 the Ford Foundation announced the creation of the US-Vietnam Dialogue on Agent Orange/Dioxin, launched with assistance from Ford's Special Initiative on Agent Orange/Dioxin. The Dialogue Group seeks to draw attention to the range of human and environmental needs related to Agent Orange in Vietnam, and to identify a wide range of donors to help address those needs. One early success in this venture has been containment of dioxin on one end of the runway at the Da Nang airport, to prevent the chemical from leaking into the surrounding soil. A written statement provided to the Subcommittee by Walter Isaacson, President of The Aspen Institute and Co-Chair of the US-Vietnam Dialogue on Agent Orange/Dioxin, provides additional information on the work of the Dialogue Group.

Thusfar, in this new climate of cautious cooperation on Agent Orange, the greater commitment of American funds and effort has come from the private side. For example, the Ford Foundation's two-year Special Initiative is funded at nearly twice the amount of the 2007 earmark. Without question, private sector support will be crucial to address Agent Orange but an equal, if not greater, share needs to come from the US Government if progress is to be made, and if Vietnam is to believe that US intentions in this regard are genuine.

### Next Steps and Recommendations

The small, incremental gains made in the Agent Orange issue area in recent years are encouraging but they do not yet add up to a solid policy. The long term nature of this problem will require the combined efforts of the US Government and American philanthropic and humanitarian organizations, as well as enduring partnerships between Vietnamese and Americans on both official and non-governmental levels. In the short to mid-term, the following steps should be considered:

1. *The US executive branch needs to develop a stronger constituency for this issue within its own ranks.* The Agent Orange issue has few, if any, champions in the foreign policy agencies, and attitudes toward it are more a matter of individuals than policy. This dynamic is not likely to change until Agent Orange and related war legacy issues are given greater attention at the political levels.
2. *Congress should consider stand-alone legislation to provide humanitarian assistance and technical aid to Vietnam on Agent Orange.* Beyond the obvious salutary effect, such legislation would help ensure long term funding for this purpose.
3. *Advocacy and education groups need to do more to bring Agent Orange and other war legacy issues to the attention of the US policy community and the American public.* Although the Vietnam War ended forty years ago, it is still a source of debate and disagreement in American society. This discourse can be channeled more constructively to address the tangible side of legacy issues. To do so, however, Americans need greater information on the long term impact of the war. For example, most university-level courses on the Vietnam War in the United States fail even to mention these issues.

4. *Assistance to Vietnamese suffering the effects of Agent Orange should be matched with more vigorous attention to the plight of US veterans.* Beyond the obvious humanitarian justification for this, helping our own veterans will be critical to building public support for a long term partnership with Vietnam on this issue.
5. *Efforts should be made to determine the extent to which wartime exposure to Agent Orange has affected Vietnamese-Americans.* Some Vietnamese-American leaders have begun to explore this issue quietly. Vietnamese-Americans who may suffer from dioxin-related disorders are effectively orphaned in this issue, since assistance is not available to them through the Veterans Administration.
6. *Best practices in the remediation of Agent Orange in Vietnam should be considered for Laos and Cambodia, along with appropriate assistance.* Although far less herbicide was sprayed in these two countries compared to the amount in Vietnam, the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” ran through both countries. The US Government denied that Agent Orange was used in Laos until a 1982 Freedom of Information request by the National Veterans Task Force on Agent Orange led to the release of Operation Ranch Hand documents which revealed spraying in Lao territory. A Lao working group on Agent Orange was formed several years ago but has not been able to make as much headway in documenting the impact of Agent Orange as have agencies and groups in Vietnam. As US-Vietnam partnerships on Agent Orange progress, they might consider triangular activities that can include Laos and Cambodia.

Although this list of future tasks and challenges may appear daunting, I believe that initiatives such as this hearing are an important component to this process, by promoting public discussion on Agent Orange and other war legacy issues. Thank you for convening these discussions, and for permitting me to participate in them.