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The Vietnam Syndrome

Agent Orange, used by the U.S. to defoliate Vietnam's jungles, has now poisoned a third generation. From Ho Chi Minh City to the town of Ben Tre, photographer James Nachtwey and the author confront that ecocide's most shocking legacy—horribly deformed children—even as new lawsuits could bring justice for more than a million victims, both Vietnamese and American.

by **Christopher Hitchens**

August 2006



17-year-old Nguyen Thi Hue, who is blind, with her mother. *Photograph by James Nachtwey.*
[View Nachtwey's photo essay on Agent Orange.](#)

To be writing these words is, for me, to undergo the severest test of my core belief—that sentences can be more powerful than pictures. A writer can hope to do what a photographer cannot: convey how things smelled and sounded as well as how things looked. I seriously doubt my ability to perform this task on this occasion. Unless you see the landscape of ecocide, or meet the eyes of its victims, you will quite simply have no idea. I am content, just for once—and especially since it is the work of the brave and tough and undeterrable James Nachtwey—to be occupying the space between pictures.

The very title of our joint subject is, I must tell you, a sick joke to begin with. Perhaps you remember the jaunty names of the callous brutes in *Reservoir Dogs*: "Mr. Pink," "Mr. Blue," and so on? Well, the tradition of giving pretty names to ugly things is as old as warfare. In Vietnam, between 1961 and 1971, the high command of the United States decided that, since a guerrilla struggle was apparently being protected by tree cover, a useful first step might be to "defoliate" those same trees. Famous corporations such as Dow and Monsanto were given the task of attacking and withering the natural order of a country. The resulting chemical weaponry was euphemistically graded by color: Agent Pink, Agent Green (yes, it's true), Agent Purple, Agent Blue, Agent White, and—spoken often in whispers—Agent Orange. This shady gang, or gang of shades, all deferred to its ruthless chief, who proudly bore the color of hectic madness. The key constituent of Agent Orange is dioxin: a horrifying chemical that makes total war not just on vegetation but also on the roots and essences of life itself. The orange, in other words, was clockwork from the start. If you wonder what the dioxin effect can look like, recall the ravaged features of Viktor Yushchenko—ironically, the leader of the Orange Revolution.

The full inventory of this historic atrocity is still being compiled: it's no exaggeration to say that about 12 million gallons of lethal toxin, in Orange form alone, were sprayed on Vietnam, on the Vietnamese, and on the American forces who were fighting in the same jungles. A prime use of the chemical was in the delta of the Mekong River, where the Swift Boats were vulnerable to attack from the luxuriant undergrowth at the water's edge. Very well, said Admiral Elmo Zumwalt Jr., we shall kill off this ambush-enabling greenery by poisoning it from the skies. Zumwalt believes his own son Elmo III, who was also serving in the delta, died from the effects of Agent Orange, leaving behind him a son with grave learning disabilities. The resulting three-generation memoir of the Zumwalt family—*My Father, My Son* (1986), written by the first and second Elmos about themselves and about the grandchild—is one of the most stoic and affecting family portraits in American history.

You have to go to Vietnam, though, to see such fallout at first hand. I had naïvely assumed that it would be relatively easy to speak to knowledgeable physicians and scientists, if only because a state that is still Communist (if only in name) would be eager to justify itself by the crimes of American imperialism. The contrary proved to be the case, and for two main reasons. The government is too poor to pay much compensation to victims, and prefers anyway to stress the heroic rather than the humiliating aspects of the war. And traditional Vietnamese culture has a tendency to frown on malformed children, whose existence is often attributed to the sins of a past life. Furthermore, Vietnamese in general set some store by pride and self-reliance, and do not like soliciting pity.

I am quite proud of what I did when I came to appreciate, in every sense of the word, these obstacles. The first time I ever gave blood was to a "Medical Aid for Vietnam" clinic, in 1967. That was also the moment when I discovered that I have a very rare blood type. So, decades later, seeing a small ad in a paper in Ho Chi Minh City (invariably still called Saigon in local conversation) that asked for blood donations for Agent Orange victims, I reported to the relevant address. I don't think they get many wheezing and perspiring Anglos at this joint, let alone wheezing and perspiring Anglos with such exclusive corpuscles; at any rate I was fussed over a good deal while two units were drawn off, was given a sustaining bowl of beef noodles and some sweet tea, and was then offered a tour of the facilities.

This privilege, after a while, I came almost to regret. In an earlier age the compassionate term for irredeemably deformed people was *lusus naturae*: "a sport of nature," or, if you prefer a more callous translation, a joke. It was bad enough, in that spare hospital, to meet the successful half of a Siamese-twin separation. This was a more or less functional human child, with some cognition and about half the usual complement of limbs and organs. But upstairs was the surplus half, which, I defy you not to have thought if you had been there, would have been more mercifully thrown away. It wasn't sufficient that this unsuccessful remnant had no real brain and was a thing of stumps and sutures. ("No ass!," murmured my stunned translator in that good-bad English that stays in your mind.) Extra torments had been thrown in. The little creature was not lying torpid and still. It was jerking and writhing in blinded, crippled, permanent epilepsy, tethered by one stump to the bedpost and given no release from endless, pointless, twitching misery. What nature indulges in such sport? What creator designs it?

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