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Agent Orange: A Deadly Legacy

by **Stephen Lendman**, August 20, 2012



Fifty-one years and counting! On August 10, 1961, America began spraying Agent Orange in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Operation Ranch Hand waged herbicidal warfare for 10 years.

Around 20,000 sorties were flown. Other spraying was done from boats, trucks, or soldiers mounted with backpacks. Over five million acres were contaminated. About 20% of South Vietnam was sprayed at least once.

Millions of gallons of dioxin-containing defoliant were used across vast areas. Concentrations were 50 times greater than for other defoliation purposes. Horrific consequences followed.

Dioxin is one of the most deadly known substances. It's both natural and man-made. It's a potent carcinogenic human immune system suppressant. Minute amounts cause serious health problems and death.

Agent Orange kills! It accumulates in adipose tissue and the liver. It alters living cell genetic structures. Exposure results in congenital disorders and birth defects. It causes cancer, type two diabetes, and numerous other diseases.

In 2009, the US Institute of Medicine reported evidence linking Agent Orange to soft-tissue sarcoma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, chronic lymphocytic leukemia (including hairy-cell leukemia), Hodgkin's disease, and chloracne.

It also associated it with prostate cancer, multiple myeloma, amyloidosis (abnormal protein deposits), Parkinson's disease, porphyria cutanea tarda (a blood and skin disorder), ischemic heart disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, peripheral neuropathy, cancer of the larynx, lung, bronchea and trachea, as well as spina bifida in offspring of exposed parents.

Vietnam's Red Cross also links it to liver cancer; lipid metabolism disorder; reproductive abnormalities; development disabilities; paralysis; and congenital deformities like cleft lip, cleft palate, club foot, hydrocephalus, neural tube defects, fused digits, and muscle malformations.

Dioxin remains toxic for decades. It's not water soluble or easily degradable. It contaminates soil, foliage, air and water. It can be inhaled, absorbed through skin, or gain bodily entry through eyes, ears, or other cavity passages. It enters the food chain. Crops, plants, animals, and sea life are poisoned.

Its effects killed millions of Southeast Asians. Many others were disabled and/or suffer from chronic illnesses. Future generations are affected like earlier ones.

Around three million US servicemen and women were harmed. So were many American civilians. Many died. Living victims suffer from diseases, birth defects, and other ill effects.

Agent Orange use was always controversial. In 1964, the Federation of American Scientists objected. In 1966, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) issued a resolution. It called for investigating its effects.

In 1967, 17 Nobel laureates and 5,000 scientists petitioned to end its use. In 1969, evidence showed birth defects and still births in mice. In 1970, ecological field tests were conducted. Other studies confirmed dioxin's harm. Ecocide and genocide best describe it. Human studies provided damning evidence.

In the early 1970s, Vietnam veterans reported skin rashes, cancer, psychological symptoms, birth defects, and other health problems. A 1979 class-action lawsuit against herbicide producers was settled out of court in 1984.

An Agent Orange Settlement Fund was established. Through 1996, affected veterans got about \$200 million in compensation. It was too little, too late. It insulted survivors.

In July 2011, 50 years after spraying began, HR 2634: Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act of 2011 was introduced. It was referred to committee. No further action was taken. Congress prioritizes war making. Effects on US service men and women from past and current ones don't matter.

Law Professor Marjorie Cohn asked what's "the difference between super powers like the United States violating the laws of war with impunity and the reports of killing of Syrian civilians by both sides in the current war?"

"Does the United States have any credibility to demand governments and non-state actors end the killings of civilians, when through wars and drones and its refusal to acknowledge responsibility for the use of Agent Orange, the United States has and is engaging in the very conduct it publicly deploras?"

It's done that and much more. It's responsible for millions of Yugoslav, Afghan, Iraqi, Libyan, and Syrian deaths, as well as many others in numerous other counties. Conventional and illegal weapons are responsible.

Depleted uranium (DU) contamination began in the 1970s. US forces used DU freely since America's Gulf war. Dirty bombs, shells, missiles, and other munitions are used.

DU and other toxic weapons are illegal under international law. The 1925 Geneva Protocol and subsequent Geneva Weapons Conventions prohibit use of chemical and biological agents in any form.

The 1925 Geneva Convention Gas Protocol prohibits poison gas. The 1907 Hague Convention bans use of any "poison or poisoned weapons."

Dioxin kills. DU is radioactive and chemically toxic. The US code, Title 50, Chapter 40, Section 2302 prohibits use of "weapons of mass destruction," saying:

"The term 'weapon of mass destruction' means any weapon or device that is intended, or has the capability, to cause death or serious bodily injury to a significant number of people through the release, dissemination, or impact of (A) toxic or poisonous chemicals or their precursors, (B) a disease organism, or (C) radiation or radioactivity."

America's use is lawless. Doing so constitutes war crimes. Millions of combatants and civilians have been irreparably harmed or killed. In current US direct and proxy wars, others are affected daily.

August 10 is International Agent Orange Day. Vietnam Agent Orange Relief & Responsibility Campaign (VAORRC) members urge observing it annually in silence at noon. Doing so for 51 seconds this year was commemorated.

Established in February 2005, VOARRC campaigns for victims denied justice. Wars remain hell when they're over. They don't end when bombs stop falling and combat ceases. Devastation remains long-lasting. Millions of Southeast Asians and US veterans suffer from physical injuries, illnesses, and/or trauma. Millions of others died.

Washington wants its toxic legacy buried and forgotten. Survivors can't let it happen. No one should tolerate America's imperial ravaging. New victims are affected daily.

American service men and women suffer like combatants and civilians they target. On average, 18 US soldiers commit suicide daily. Countless others suffer physical and psychological injuries. PTSD, depression, neurotic disorders and psychoses are commonplace.

Thousands of war veterans come home permanently disabled. Many more experience chronic illnesses. PTSD sufferers experience anxiety, nervousness in crowds, depression, flashbacks, nightmares, trouble concentrating, difficulty sleeping, feelings of detachment, irritability, and unusual behavior.

Normal kids come home killers. Wives, children, and others are abused. Alcoholism, drug abuse, and violence are common. Many needing help don't get it.

America doesn't give a damn about men and women sent to war when they're no longer needed. In 2011, the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals said it usually takes around four years for the Department of Veterans Affairs to begin providing proper mental healthcare. Funding is inadequate.

It takes weeks or longer for suicidal vets to be examined. For many it's too late. Countless others suffer from America's toxic legacy. They're nameless and faceless out of sight and mind at home.

Nothing done compensates for tragedy. Ending wars alone can prevent them. What greater priority than that!

A Final Comment

In December 2009, a five-part Chicago Tribune series focused on Agent Orange's deadly legacy. Since its health threats were acknowledged, America "established a record of neglect," it said.

Veterans and affected family members seeking help and compensation "face delays and a maddening bureaucracy." Southeast Asians were abandoned and forgotten.

Forty years later, two offspring of an Vietnam vet may or may not reflect others. Between them, they've had 41 surgeries, including five brain operations, two for spinal cord injuries, and one hysterectomy. Their father died in 2008 from leukemia. He waited years for proper help.

Both daughters have Chiari malformations. It's a structural brain defect. It's associated with spin bifida. One daughter waited three and half years for help. It was inadequate, and by then her bladder shut down.

Her sister sought help and was denied. "They're waiting for you to die," she said. Imagine the deplorable suffering of millions of Southeast Asians.

Compassion was never America's long suit. Killing, destruction, conquest, and plunder are prioritized. Imagine what's planned ahead. Human needs be damned. Wealth, power and dominance alone matter.

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<http://www.veteranstoday.com/2012/08/20/agent-orange-a-deadly-legacy/>