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## **INTRODUCTION: A Legacy Revisited**

**Agent Orange is still damaging lives  
in Vietnam. The time has come  
for America to act.**

By [Walter Isaacson](#)

A few years ago, I found myself at the storied Da Nang Airport, once a main U.S. air base in Vietnam, with my colleague from the Aspen Institute, Bill Mayer. Bill had been an Air Force pilot during the war, flying military supplies into Da Nang and bringing back, in the cargo bays of his C-124s, the coffins of fallen American soldiers. At Da Nang we met Bui The Giang, a top Communist Party official who, during the war, had served in a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft battalion. Whether Giang had ever taken a shot at one of Bill's planes was a subject of speculation between the two old soldiers. That their conversation was friendly and relaxed was a sign, I thought, of just how far the U.S. and Vietnam have come since the two countries normalized diplomatic relations nearly fifteen years ago.

Bill and I were there as part of the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin, which I cochair. The aim of our binational and nonpartisan committee is to marshal support for resolving one of the Vietnam War's last legacies and an abiding irritant to an increasingly valuable U.S. ally and trading partner. From 1962 to 1971, America sprayed close to 20 million gallons of the herbicide Agent Orange across the region, to defoliate dense jungle in order to better detect movement of personnel and equipment from north to south, and to destroy enemy crops. That spraying left behind a residue of dioxin, a persistent and highly toxic chemical that can both shorten the life of humans exposed to it and potentially degrade the health of future generations. At Da Nang, a major storage site for Agent Orange during the war, large quantities of the chemical leaked into the surrounding land and water. As we walked the barren ground with other members of our delegation—former EPA chief Christine Todd Whitman, the Ford Foundation's then President Susan Berresford, Professor Vo Quy of Hanoi University, and Vietnam National Assembly member Ton Nu Thi Ninh—we stopped by a lake where the locals can no longer fish because of the dioxin pollution. At the very least, we resolved, we should begin by containing and then cleaning up the toxic waste that America left behind on this famous site.

The Vietnamese government claims that several million of its citizens suffer from health effects due to this chemical—from muscular and skeletal disorders to such birth defects as mental retardation. On our trip we witnessed heartbreaking scenes in Thai Binh Province, far from the war zone, where an estimated 10,000 disabled children and grandchildren were born to veterans of the conflict. Many had stunted limbs or curved spines, and they were working hard at the physical training that would be necessary for them to enter the workforce or take care of themselves. Science has demonstrated links between dioxin and many, if not all, of these medical conditions. However, it is almost impossible to establish direct causal connections between individual sufferers and their possible exposure to Agent Orange.

What to think and do about the complicated problem of Agent Orange's long-term damage is the subject of this special report put together by the *Washington Monthly*. In "[Agent of Influence](#)," Joshua Kurlantzick and Geoffrey Cain explore the tricky scientific and diplomatic terrain of this issue and argue that there are compelling geostrategic reasons for the United States to engage in resolving it. In "[The Environmental Consequences of War](#)," Clay Risen looks at the broader question of how and why other nations have—or, more often, have not—taken responsibility for ameliorating the environmental and health consequences of their actions in past wars. And in "[A Hard Way to Die](#)," Phillip Longman brings the topic home, with a report on why, after years of effort, the U.S. government is still not providing American veterans exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam with the care they need and deserve.

Fortunately, the hard work of overcoming the legacy of Agent Orange has begun. In 2006, U.S. President George W. Bush and Vietnam President Nguyen Minh Triet agreed to undertake cooperative efforts to stop further leaks from the old Agent Orange storage sites. In 2007, Congress appropriated \$3 million for the cleanup of dioxin in and around Da Nang and for health programs in surrounding communities, with \$3 million more provided in the 2009 and 2010 budgets. Now that the U.S. government has established the precedent of helping, the Obama administration can and should move more forcefully toward finally solving this problem. In addition, the Ford Foundation has donated its own funds to help at the Da Nang Airport and in other affected areas. America's foreign policy has always been motivated by both our nation's ideals and its strategic interests. Helping to resolve the Agent Orange issue would serve both. Vietnam has become a key strategic and economic partner, with a citizenry that is very supportive of American interests. By helping to clean up what we left behind, we would be displaying our basic decency and values as a people. In doing so, we might provide some closure, both for ourselves and for the Vietnamese, to a long-ago war and its lingering legacies.