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THE SCIENCE COUNCIL FOR RESEARCH IN VIETNAM

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THE SCIENCE COUNCIL FOR RESEARCH IN VIETNAM

I. Introduction - The Council's Purpose

In the aftermath of the Vietnam conflict, there are several ongoing scientific issues of direct interest to the United States. Among the most important of these is the continuing concern of many who served in the U. S. Armed Forces in Vietnam and their families about possible long-term adverse health effects as a result of that service.

In the last few years, significant public attention has focused on Agent Orange, a phenoxy herbicide used extensively in Vietnam for defoliating jungle areas and base perimeters. Agent Orange was made by combining two herbicides (2,4-D and 2,4,5-T) that were in widespread use in agriculture and forestry. During the manufacturing process, 2,4,5-T is unavoidably contaminated with 2,3,7,8-TCDD, a highly toxic form of dioxin. Approximately 100 million pounds of Agent Orange were used in Vietnam between 1964 and 1970. Its use was halted when scientific reports indicated a possible association between exposure to 2,4,5-T and birth defects.

The Veterans Administration began receiving complaints in 1978 from veterans alleging health problems as a result of exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. Among problems reported to the VA are various forms of cancer, liver ailments, neurological disorders, loss of sexual potency, skin lesions, birth defects among offspring, as well as generalized multi-system disorders. Additionally, several other possible causes have been suggested for the unusual health problems reported among the Vietnam veteran population and their children. These include: other herbicides used in Vietnam (such as Agent Blue, an arsenical); Dapsone (an anti-malarial drug with adverse side effects reported in the scientific literature); aflatoxin (a naturally occurring toxin that sometimes occurs in rice in Southeast Asia); as well as drug and/or alcohol use among servicemen.

The veterans' concerns have resulted in a substantial amount of attention being given by the scientific community in this country and throughout the world to both Agent Orange-related questions and the broader public health issues raised by the reports. Unfortunately, despite much speculation among scientists and in the media, there are still few definitive answers to the difficult scientific issues involved. There is, accordingly, a critical need for a comprehensive scientific research program to seek and develop answers.

To meet this need, the Federal government has embarked on a major scientific research program designed to examine, insofar as practicable, the issues raised by the veterans' health concerns and to attempt to reach scientifically valid conclusions about the relative merits of those concerns. This research program is aimed at examining the possible health effects of exposure to phenoxy herbicides, including Agent Orange, but includes as well a broader examination of other potential health hazards to which American servicemen were exposed in Southeast Asia. It includes several major studies which are already underway or are in advanced stages of planning. Among these are, first, a detailed examination and study of the flight crews and ground support personnel involved in the U. S. Air Force "Ranch Hand" program which sprayed Agent Orange in Vietnam. This study, which is being conducted by the Air Force and overseen by an independent scientific advisory panel, is underway and initial results are expected in late 1983, with the study to continue for approximately 20 years in order to enhance the likelihood of detecting latent or subtle health effects.

Second, the program includes a birth defects study, also already begun, that is being conducted by the Centers for Disease Control of the U. S. Public Health Service. This study is designed to address the concern of many Vietnam veterans and their families about the possibility of birth defects among their children. It involves use of health data in the Atlanta Congenital Birth Defects Registry. This study also is expected to yield initial results in 1983, with full results over the following year or two.

Third, a major study of U. S. Armed Forces ground troops in Vietnam is currently being planned. A scientific protocol, prepared by UCLA's School of Public Health, is now in extensive scientific peer reviews. The ground troops study, which is to be conducted under the direction of the Veterans Administration, will examine, insofar as practicable, a wide range of possible health problems among the Vietnam veteran population. Like the two studies cited above, this study will also be ongoing for a number of years. In addition to these three major studies, the Federal government has undertaken or is planning a number of related studies to examine various aspects of the issued raised by the Agent Orange controversy.

In early 1980, overall responsibility for planning, coordinating, and monitoring all Agent Orange studies at the Federal level was assigned by the Carter Administration to an interagency work group under the leadership of the Department of Health and Human Services. Also participating on the original Interagency Work Group (IWG) were the Departments of Defense, Agriculture, and Labor, the Veterans Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency, with the Congress' scientific advisor, the Office of Technology Assessment, participating as an observer. In July, 1981, the Reagan Administration upgraded and expanded the original group by creating the current Agent Orange Working Group (AOWG) of the Cabinet Council on Human Resources. Like the original interagency work group, the leadership role in the AOWG is assigned to the Department of Health and Human Services, and participants include all of the original member agencies as well as several others, with the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment continuing as an observer. Further, as was the case with the original interagency work group, the key role in the AOWG is played by its Scientific Panel, which is comprised of eminent Federal scientists representing a wide range of scientific disciplines, backgrounds, and perspectives.

Broadly defined, the mission of the Federal Agent Orange Work Group--and most particularly its Scientific Panel--is to develop and monitor the conduct of all Agent Orange-related research being conducted or funded by the Federal government, as well as to report on, review and interpret the results of that research.

Early in its activities, the original Scientific Panel prepared and submitted for review by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences an interim research agenda on Agent Orange and related topics which was endorsed by that Council as scientifically sound. The current Federal research effort is continuing along the lines charted by the original Scientific Panel in that interim agenda, with a continuing commitment of funding and personnel resources by both the Carter and Reagan Administrations, and broad support from a wide spectrum of Members of Congress of all political persuasions. Additionally, virtually all of the national veterans organizations have embraced the basic thrust of the Federal scientific research effort as being generally responsible, honest, and fairly well organized. This is not to say that there is unanimity on all issues within the veterans community or in the Administration, the Congress or the scientific community. There is, however, broad consensus that the Federal government has been working responsibly toward resolving the important public health issues presented.

In addition to the Federal effort, a number of States have established Agent Orange Commissions, with State legislatures mandating or authorizing State departments of public health and/or State universities to conduct Agent Orange-related health studies. Moreover, a number of universities and individual researchers throughout the United States and abroad have, for some time, been conducting public health and environmental research on phenoxy herbicides. Also contributing to the increased amount of information available in the scientific community is a comprehensive review of the world's scientific literature on phenoxy herbicides recently compiled for the Veterans Administration.

While considerable governmental and private scientific resources are being applied in the United States and abroad in attempting to address both the Agent Orange issue and, to a certain extent, the broader public health issues raised by the long-term worldwide use of phenoxy herbicides in forestry and agriculture, there is a significant gap in these scientific efforts and studies. It is the absence of on-site work in Vietnam. Specifically, the scientific investigation of the Agent Orange issue is being directly inhibited, first, by the absence of reliable, independently gathered and verified data on environmental conditions in Vietnam, especially in areas that were heavily sprayed with herbicides during the Vietnam conflict, and, second, by the lack of reliable data regarding the health status of the Vietnamese population.

For example, basic environmental data would demonstrably aid government scientists in designing and helping to assure the reliability of the U. S. ground troops study currently being planned. Representative soil samples could be gathered from test and control areas proposed for use in selecting ground troop populations to be included in the study. The analysis of these soil sample data could prove invaluable in enhancing the reliability of the test and control populations chosen for the study.

While not imperative, these and other basic environmental and public health data--if gathered and analyzed in accordance with standard scientific practices--could be of major importance to Federal and university-based phenoxy herbicide research. Additionally, as an unfortunate but real legacy of the conflict there, Vietnam provides a major opportunity for the scientific community to conduct a wide range of environmental and public health studies of general application and importance.

While the scientific community has been proceeding to study the Agent Orange issue without access to Vietnam, it would clearly be desirable to improve the reliability of the research, and the likelihood of success in finding answers to the veterans' concerns, through direct access to Vietnam by American scientific researchers.

The basic purpose of the Science Council for Research in Vietnam will be to create such access. The Council will serve as an independent, nonprofit scientific advisory body and resource center to facilitate, review, monitor, report on, and, in some cases, actually to undertake directly scientific research in Vietnam. Heavy emphasis will be placed in initial research undertaken under Council auspices on complementing the current research effort of the United States Government under the aegis of the Agent Orange Work Group. A second and related purpose of the Council will be to develop, conduct, and coordinate, and report to the scientific community on the findings of more broadly focused scientific studies in Vietnam. A third purpose will be to encourage the development of cooperative exchanges of scientific information, resources and expertise between the United States and Vietnam, primarily through American and Vietnamese universities.

II. Operation and Integrity of the Council

The Council will be entirely independent of any other organization and will not have formal affiliation with any other organization. It will not operate to promote the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam, nor will it engage in any activities other than the scientific effort described above. Initially, as noted above, the prime focus of the Council will be to design and carry out a series of scientific research activities in Vietnam designed to fill in, as quickly as possible, gaps in basic scientific data needed, or desirable, to help support Federally sponsored Agent Orange research.

Once that effort is underway, the Council's program will expand. To assure the scientific caliber, integrity and independence of all Council-sanctioned research, the basic framework and approach of the White House Agent Orange Working Group's Scientific Panel will be followed with respect to all scientific activities undertaken by the Council. Specifically, scientific activity reports and time tables, funding charts, protocol descriptions, and all other documentation will be prepared in the formats, and with the content, established and used for AOWG activity. Each scientific activity proposed for inclusion in the Council's program will be subjected to outside, independent peer review to assure the integrity and adequacy of the proposed protocol, and all data and analyses will be similarly subjected to independent peer review. Additionally, regular reports of all of the Council's activities will be made publicly available and an effort will be made to assure continuing coordination and cooperation with the Federal researchers.

Importantly, each of the major scientific disciplines will be represented on the Council by eminent university-based scientists recognized for their independence, competence, and integrity. Scientists serving as resources to the Council will do so without compensation, although those engaged in direct research sponsored by the Council will, of course, be underwritten by the Council, and out-of-pocket expenses, such as for travel to peer review meetings, will be reimbursed wherever possible. Attached as Appendix A is an initial list of prospective areas of scientific cooperation between the United States and Vietnam, which reflects in general terms the nature and breadth of the expertise to be sought.

III. Official and Diplomatic Understandings

To assure the Council's scientific integrity and independence, the State Department will be consulted to help arrange a complete set of written, albeit unofficial advance understandings for all transactions with the Vietnamese. These understandings would contemplate covering, at a minimum, the following commitments on the part of Vietnam:

- Assured free access for visiting American scientists and support personnel as necessary to carry out Council-sanctioned scientific research;
- No engagement of visiting scientists or support personnel in any political or media activities while in Vietnam;
- Provision, within available resources, of facilities and logistical support as necessary to support scientific activities; and
- No effort to tie the Council's activity to any other agenda, such as the normalization of relations between United States and Vietnam.

Thus, the Council will work closely with the State Department to develop a set of ground rules for all activities to be undertaken by the Council that involve direct contact with the Vietnamese. Also, the Council will work with the State Department to help develop procedures for ultimately including in scientific delegations making site visits to Vietnam only those scientists who are directly involved in the Federal government's research effort. Again in consultation with the State Department, the Council will attempt to secure written agreement by representatives of Vietnam to the above conditions and/or to any additional or alternative conditions suggested by the State Department. This approach is intended to insure the integrity of the Council's scientific efforts as well as to provide insulation for American scientists and universities participating in Council-sponsored activities against charges of dealing with a country with which the United States has no diplomatic relations.

IV. Funding

Funding of individual research projects sponsored by the Council will be provided by charitable, service organization, corporate, university, individual or governmental sources interested in supporting particular research activities. It is expected that the activities of the Council will be developmental and, hence, a detailed budget must reflect that fact. However, initial start-up costs for administrative and logistical support are expected to be in the range of $75,000 to $100,000. This will include the cost of arranging understandings with the Vietnamese authorities as well as initial trips to Vietnam by scientific and policy advisors to the Council. The nature and scope of the program subsequently undertaken by the Council will directly depend on the reputation developed by the Council for scientific integrity and impartiality and the level of funding support secured. At the outset, however, the Council will be created and will develop detailed plans for the first stage of its research program within six weeks of meeting its initial funding requirements.

V. Public Affairs

Because of the continuing bitterness from the Vietnam conflict, a major effort will be required to explain the Council's purpose and and its program. Most particularly, this effort will stress the importance of the Council as a means of helping to answer questions about possible long-term adverse health effects among veterans as a result of their service in Vietnam that cannot be answered in any other way.

VI. Sponsorship

Initially, the development of the Science Council for Research in Vietnam is being undertaken as a project of the Vietnam Veterans of America. It is a continued and direct outgrowth of the late 1981 visit to Vietnam by Mr. Robert Muller, Executive Director of the VVA, and Mr. John Terzano, Washington Office Director. Both Mr. Muller and Mr. Terzano, as well as the other two veterans who accompanied them, are American veterans who believe that scientific research in Vietnam can directly contribute to

finding answers to serious unanswered questions about Agent Orange. Moreover, they believe that the Council can and will help accelerate and strengthen the healing process in America from the wounds of the Vietnam conflict. The VVA expects to enlist the support in this effort of a wide spectrum of veterans organizations, as well as bi-partisan support from Members of Congress and at least informal approval from the Administration. In sum, the proposed Council can and will serve to fill a much-needed function for America's Vietnam veterans and their families and for others generally concerned about the aftermath of the Vietnam conflict.

AREAS OF COOPERATION - U.S. AND VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITIES

1. Priority areas
   a. microbiology
   b. microelectronics and microprocessor applications — export admin. regs.
   c. applied mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology
   d. environmental protection

2. General areas of interest

Chemistry
   a. Chemistry of natural products - steroid compounds, terpenoid chemistry
   b. Separation and concentration of rare and noble elements
   c. Polymers - based on using natural products of Vietnam, for use in medicine, etc.
   d. Surface chemistry - silica and alumina-silica systems
   e. Inorganic - semiconductor use in electronics, in organics derived from native materials
   f. Catalysis and Petrochemistry; catalysts based on rare earths, zeolite
   g. Organic - polymerization of acrylamide, synthesis of insect hormones
   h. Rust corrosion
   i. Tropicalization techniques

Physics
   1. Applied solid state, amorphous semiconductors
   2. Microelectronics and microprocessor applications
   3. X-ray fluorescence, radiochemical methods
   4. Theoretical physics - supergravity, gauge theories, etc.

Biology
   1. Microbiology especially as applied to industrial applications
   2. Plant physiology and plant and seed protection, plant genetics
   3. Nitrogenation techniques

Engineering and Agriculture
   1. Urban planning
   2. Appropriate technology studies
   3. Solar energy applications - crop drying, shrimp dryer
   4. Acid soils - rice production
   5. Soybean processing, growing
   6. Systems analysis; Computer science
   7. Agricultural economists - problems relating to storage, transport, portuary facilities, energy usage
   8. Fisheries - shrimp and clam culture and production - freshwater fish production and culture
   9. Sericulture research and development
   10. Milk production
   11. Forestry - engineering, training, products research, rehabilitation of forestry equipment
   12. Ecology - water management, hydraulic science training, groundwater exploration, protection of the environment

Health Science
   1. Nursing training

2. Cardiology, orthopedics
3. Pediatrics
4. Nutrition - nutritional disorders caused by malnourishment
5. Design of pilot plant for the production of antibiotics
6. Infectious tropical diseases; malaria, dysentary