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**Author**

**Corporate Author** Office of the Press Secretary, The White House

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 24, 1984

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

I am pleased today to sign H.R. 1961, the "Veterans' Dioxin and Radiation Exposure Compensation Standards Act." This bill represents the culmination of nearly two years of work between the Administration and the Congress on the best way to handle the claims of veterans who believe they may have been injured by their exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam or to low-level ionizing radiation from their participation in the atomic weapons atmospheric testing program in the 1950's and early 1960's or from the occupation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. H.R. 1961 establishes a responsible and workable process for consideration by the Veterans' Administration of these claims.

Over the past few years, questions have arisen regarding the long-term health effects resulting from Agent Orange exposure. We now know that the Agent Orange used in Vietnam was contaminated with trace amounts of dioxin. There is, however, substantial scientific uncertainty on whether this exposure to Agent Orange causes any long-term adverse health effects.

Two recent studies, the Ranch Hand morbidity and mortality study of the Air Force personnel who were involved in spraying Agent Orange and the birth defects study by the Center for Disease Control, concluded that there is no significant evidence of such adverse health effects. Nevertheless, the Administration is firmly committed to continuing research on the health effects of Agent Orange exposure, and the Center for Disease Control is now in the process of conducting a major epidemiological study to provide further information on this important question.

The bill also addresses the claims of those veterans who were exposed to low levels of ionizing radiation from the atomic weapons atmospheric testing program or from the occupation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While radiation indisputably has serious adverse health effects at high dose levels, there is scientific uncertainty about its adverse health effects at the very low levels underlying these claims.

This bill requires the Administrator of Veterans' Affairs to publish regulations assuring the fair and consistent adjudication of these exposure claims. In doing so, the Administrator will have the assistance of a specially created advisory committee of scientists to evaluate the evidence and make appropriate recommendations. With the benefit of these recommendations, the Administrator will promulgate regulations grounded on the best available scientific and medical evidence.

Even though the available evidence does not suggest the existence of adverse long-term health effects from Agent Orange or low-level ionizing radiation exposure, because there is some uncertainty on this point, the Veterans' Administration has for several years been providing free, comprehensive

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health care for any veteran who believes that he or she may have an illness traceable to either exposure. To date, there have been over one million instances of such care.

H.R. 1961 reaffirms the Administration's strong commitment to the well-being of the men and women who have served this Nation with honor and distinction. By giving the Veterans' Administration the opportunity to conduct a careful, systematic review of the evidence underlying these claims, the bill accomplishes two important purposes:

-- When veterans suffer from illnesses due to their exposure to Agent Orange or low-level radiation, it lays the groundwork for awarding the compensation to which they are rightfully entitled.

-- But, as importantly, it will have the Veterans' Administration provide assurance to those concerned about their health and the health of their children where past exposures have not triggered present dangers.

Veterans deserve to know the truth about the consequences of their exposure to Agent Orange or to low-level radiation, and they should not live in fear if that fear is unjustified. This bill will facilitate the search for that truth, and I am therefore pleased to sign it.

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