

Remembrance and Reconciliation—the Agent Orange Legacy

Memorial Day 2018
Speech by Charles R. Bailey
Lummi Island, Washington
May 28, 2018

Ladies and Gentlemen.

It's an honor to be here today as we come together to remember and pay tribute to some of our nation's finest and bravest.

Standing here in our Lummi Island community I think President George H. W. Bush said it right, and I quote:

"Whether we observe the occasion through public ceremony or through private prayer, Memorial Day leaves few hearts unmoved. Each of the patriots whom we remember on this day was first a beloved son or daughter, a brother or sister, or a spouse, friend, and neighbor."

On Memorial Day we remember Americans who died in all America's wars. While honoring those who made the ultimate sacrifice during war, Memorial Day also presents an opportunity for Americans to reflect upon the loss of life because of war. The deaths on the battlefield only tell part of the story. This morning I am going to talk about the Vietnam War and one of the legacies of that conflict, Agent Orange.

But first a bit of background. In 1997, the Ford Foundation asked me to move to Vietnam to lead their newly opened program there.

In the fall of 1998, I visited an agricultural project in the Central Highlands and saw hillsides which once had been covered with deep, ecologically rich forests, but now held just scrub vegetation. I was stunned. I was even more surprised when I returned to Hanoi and found no one there who was willing to talk about Agent Orange. The State Department had in fact instructed our embassy's diplomats not even to utter the phrase "Agent Orange."

I felt this needed to change. Slowly, through a combination of Ford Foundation grants and my advocacy, it did change. I became deeply involved in transforming a terrible legacy into an opportunity.

But what is Agent Orange? Most Americans know about Agent Orange and that it was sprayed from planes. What they don't know is that the spraying went on for nine years. As many as 2.8 million American military personnel and 4.1 million Vietnamese may have been exposed.

Today, fifty years later, both our veterans and the Vietnamese are still feeling the harmful effects. Dioxin is the heart of the problem; it was a contaminant in the Agent Orange. Dioxin is associated with massive health problems for many of those who were exposed and it's linked to birth defects among their children, grandchildren and now their great grandchildren.

Successive U.S. Administrations have continued to assert that there is not enough evidence showing that Agent Orange caused the diseases and birth defects that Vietnam veterans and the Vietnamese people suffer.

But what is the actual situation today? What is the U.S. doing for our Vietnam veterans impacted by Agent Orange? And what are the Vietnamese doing about their Agent Orange victims?

Thanks to Senator Tom Daschle who sponsored the Agent Orange Act of 1991, the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2015 paid \$24 billion dollars in disability compensation to 1.3 million veterans who served in our armed forces sometime during the Vietnam era. 528,000 of the recipients of this assistance, about 40 percent, were boots on the ground in Vietnam and later in life contracted one of more than a dozen illnesses associated with exposure to Agent Orange. Some of their children, and now their grandchildren have been impacted but for the most part do not receive help. This needs to change.

Vietnam has its own program of assistance for Agent Orange victims. In 2016 their program paid the equivalent of \$270 million dollars in allowances to 335,000 of their veterans who suffer from the same diseases as American vets or whose children were born with congenital deformities. An additional 465,000 Vietnamese Agent Orange victims receive help through funds raised by local NGOs.

This is what each country is doing separately, on its own. But is there any cooperation, any convergence between the U.S. and Vietnam, on Agent Orange?

I am happy to report that there is.

As with our veterans in 1991 the leadership on dealing with Vietnam and Agent Orange has come from the Congress, in this case from Senator Patrick Leahy. As a result of Leahy's work, since 2007 the Congress has appropriated \$230 million dollars for Agent Orange in Vietnam. Twenty percent of the funds have gone for health and disability assistance and 80 percent to clean up the residual dioxin. And the money has been used well.

On health and disability the U.S. works with Vietnam to channel assistance to severely disabled children and youth in the most heavily sprayed provinces in former South Vietnam. At the moment this assistance highlights Tay Ninh province on the border with Cambodia adjacent to the Parrot's Beak and an area of particularly intense fighting during the war.

On the residual dioxin, the U.S. and Vietnam have jointly concluded that dioxin poses no threat to public health throughout the country except at three former American military bases. Two of the three bases, at Phu Cat and Da Nang, have now been cleaned up. The third, the airbase at Bien Hoa, is a bigger challenge-- it contains 750,000 tons of dioxin contaminated soil which lies 20 miles upstream from Ho Chi Minh City, a city of 8.5 million people.

Clean up at Bien Hoa may cost as much as \$500 million dollars over the next ten years. Health and disability assistance will need to continue for a similar period of time. In 2016 the Obama

Administration committed to working with the Vietnamese to clean up Bien Hoa and last November the Trump Administration reconfirmed this commitment.

The Agent Orange issue has come a long way in Washington and there is now a beginning sense that Americans do have a moral obligation to stay the course with Vietnam on Agent Orange but more champions and greater public awareness are needed. We also need to continue to pay attention to the needs of our own veterans.

In the Congress lawmakers view Agent Orange in Vietnam as both an issue of humanitarian assistance and an opportunity to turn the page on the past and establish a wholly new relationship with Vietnam in the 21st century. Vietnam is now a country of 95 million people, the 13th largest country in the world. Vietnam is also a country of young people, with the vast majority born long after the end of the war. Trade between the U.S. and Vietnam has nearly tripled in the last seven years and now exceeds \$45 billion dollars annually. Close to 19,000 Vietnamese are now studying in the United States. And close to half of Vietnam's 95 million people are on Facebook.

The end of the disaster of Agent Orange is within the reach of people of goodwill on both sides—those in government, the two militaries and those in civilian life. Given the positive record of collaboration and partnership since 2007, it would be foolish, and indeed disgraceful, not to carry through to the completion of the task.

Trust and cooperation between former enemies are often rebuilt and fortified through the work the parties do to remediate the terrible aftermath of war. Postwar measures will never be able to erase deep scars, restore personal losses or make up for great hardship. However, if they are undertaken in good spirit and with vigor and sincerity, they can unite people on a forward path of mutual respect and friendship.

Both Vietnam and the United States want to move forward in this way together

Thank you.