

The use of agent orange in the vietnam war research paper

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Forty years before their immersion in Afghanistan, America had faced a similar problem in the Vietnam jungles. They urgently needed to find a way of counteracting the enemy's capacity to hide from weapons while living off the land. They decided to use Agent Orange, a herbicide designed to kill the forests that were sheltering the enemy. However, this decision was arguably one of the worst that were made throughout the course of the war. The herbicide proved to be a cause of cancer (cancer). Moreover, even today, children are being born with defects and illnesses as effect of the use of Agent Orange in the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War took place across Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia from 1955 until 1975. The United States became involved in the war in order to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam and part of a wider strategy of containment. The US and South Vietnamese forces counted on air superiority and firepower to carry out search and destroy operations, including ground forces, artillery and airstrikes (Learn).

Between 1961 and 1971, the US government sprayed around twenty million gallons of herbicides and defoliants over huge areas of South Vietnam, in "Operation Trail Dust." Almost ninety-five per cent of the chemicals were sprayed by the US Air Force flying C-123s as part of "Operation Ranch Hand" (Agent). The planes usually sprayed a 14 kilometre area of land in around four and a half minutes. The other five per cent was sprayed by hand, helicopters, backpacks, and trucks by the US Army Chemical Corps and associated forces (Agent). The herbicides used were up to fifty times more concentrated than they would have been for standard agricultural use. Of these herbicides, the most commonly used was Herbicide Orange, usually

referred to as “ Agent Orange.” Agent Orange was comprised of a half and half mixture of the two herbicides 2, 4-D and 2, 4, 5-T (Agent). The additional commonly used chemicals were Agent Blue and Agent White.

In understanding the use of Agent Orange in the Vietnam War, it is important to comprehend how it came about. When in January of 1961 President Kennedy came into office, questions about how to proceed in Vietnam were already growing. By May of 1961, America’s objectives in Vietnam were to “ prevent communist domination of South Vietnam; to create a viable and increasingly democratic society, and to initiate, on an accelerated basis, a series of mutually supporting actions of a military, political, economic, psychological, and covert character to achieve this objective” (Agent).

The US forces helped South Vietnam to ascertain which military strategies and weapons could be used against the guerrilla fight. One of the enemy’s main advantages was their ability to hide under cover of the forest and living off the land. Therefore a herbicide strong enough to prevent the North Vietnam Army and Viet Cong from doing this was very attractive.

The defoliation program began on a small scale. Early on, the Department of Defence, the State Department and the government of South Vietnam debated its effectiveness and nearly stopped its use. However, by November 1961 President Kennedy was in agreement with his advisors and decided that the US should “ participate in a selective and carefully controlled joint program of defoliant operations in Vietnam starting with the clearance of key routes and proceed thereafter to food denial only if the most careful basis of resettlement and alternative food supply has been created” (Agent).

As the American involvement in Vietnam intensified, the use of herbicides

did as well. Operation Ranch Hand was extended in December 1965, to contain parts of southern and eastern Laos. The program was at its highest in 1967 when over a million and a half acres were sprayed (Agent).

Over time, concerns were raised in Washington about how the use of chemical herbicides would be thought of in the world community, and how the North Vietnamese government would use the program as a tool for propaganda. However, Secretary of State Dean Rusk guaranteed President Kennedy that the herbicide use was an standard war method and did not infringe international law (Agent). Contrasting with mustard gas, for example, Agent Orange was directed against trees and crops, not against humans. In the situation of the early 1960s, the use of most herbicides would be perceived as fair in war. Moreover, at this stage in the program it is unlikely that the US government knew that the herbicides containing 2, 4, 5-T were contaminated with dioxin.

While there was opposition to the herbicide program from the start, in 1967 the disapproval grew when the Federation of American Scientists delivered a petition with over 5000 signatures of renowned scientists. Apprehensions about the ecological effects of the herbicides in Vietnam were also broached by American scientists: the Association of American Association for the Advancement of Science called for investigations to take place in Vietnam (Agent).

In 1969, it became well-known about the contamination of dioxin, a toxic chemical found to cause adverse health effects and birth outcomes in studies (Agent). In April 1970, the US government limited use of Agent Orange in Vietnam and the US. On January 7, 1971, the last official spray run

took place (Agent).

Agent Orange marked Vietnam in several different ways. The spraying of the herbicide is thought to have led to a whole variety of illnesses as the Vietnamese inhaled the fumes or were exposed to the actual liquid, or merely ate from a contaminated food chain. Vietnamese have suffered many illnesses that have been found to be linked with dioxin (Agent).

Perhaps more disturbingly, Agent Orange has been found to be affecting new generations of Vietnamese, producing an extensive range of disabilities amid the children and grandchildren of those exposed to it. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that the last victims of the Vietnam War are still yet to be born.

Of course, these impacts were unintentional. The US intention was to destruct jungle and crops, and Agent Orange achieved this. Huge areas of Vietnamese countryside were destroyed, and will not fully heal for many years yet (Agent). For now, the dioxin contaminant in Agent Orange continues to live on.

The Vietnam War is talked about today as a war with a contestable purpose, at least in terms of American involvement. It is also known to have been one of the most grim wars in our history. However, the fact that even today, it is still having such adverse effects on Vietnam is perhaps one of the largest tragedies.

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