# THEIR ENDLESS WAR:

# THE LEGACY OF AGENT ORANGE AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS' COMPENSATION MOVEMENT, 1978-1984

by

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In the late 1970s, some Vietnam veterans accused the US government of dismissing its obligation to provide them financial and medical compensation for injuries they believed were sustained during the Vietnam War. Veterans and their families argued that exposure to Agent Orange, a toxic defoliant sprayed abundantly during the conflict, was responsible for several mysterious illnesses and birth defects. Activist veterans seeking benefits from the government participated in the Agent Orange Compensation movement from 1978-1984. The Movement serves as a historical medium to explore meanings of the Vietnam experience for veterans, their families and America in the decade immediately following the War's ambiguous conclusion. The Agent Orange controversy engaged the nation in a discourse about the legacy of the Vietnam War. The course of this legacy is still not completely charted and will be greatly influenced by the treatment America accords its veterans.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

> Maybe...the chemicals which make up Agent Orange may in the end appear to be much ado about very little indeed. On the other hand, they may ultimately be regarded as portending the most horrible tragedy ever known to mankind.[1]
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> *-Senator Philip Hart, 1970*

Almost twenty-five year after America's official withdrawal from Vietnam, the legacy of the War on the lives of some veterans remains unclear and unresolved. Unfortunately, the emotional and physical wounds inflicted on many Vietnam veterans and their families were not healed when President Gerald Ford proclaimed the end of the Vietnam Era in 1975. From the end of American involvement in Vietnam until the mid-1980s, groups of Vietnam veterans participated in social movements. Activist veterans complained of government neglect. They sought improved health benefits, educational opportunities, counseling programs and vocational training as a means of re-establishing themselves in America.

One of the most visible and well publicized veterans' rights groups was a vocal collection of ex-soldiers and their families. They claimed their exposure to the herbicide Agent Orange was the cause of numerous health maladies and birth defects. Historians have written little of the "Agent Orange Compensation and Recognition Movement" from 1978 to 1984 probably because the issue is still far too contemporary to allow for proper perspective. The Compensation movement was a cause supported by activist Vietnam veterans and their families to secure medical and financial benefits from the

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[1] U.S. Congress, House, Thomas A. Daschle, Congressional Record, 96th Cong., 2nd sess., v126, pt 16, p 20938, 31 July 1980.

government and the chemical manufacturers of Agent Orange. As increasing numbers of veterans complained of Agent Orange induced illnesses/ disease, the movement gained momentum in the late 1970s, climaxed when a class-action settlement was reached with the chemical companies in 1984, and thereafter, slowly faded from the national spotlight. The US government, as represented by the Veterans Administration, held that there was no definitive causal relationship linking Agent Orange and disease. The agency refused to provide medical care to veterans who asserted that their health problems were "service-connected." Veterans were infuriated and began a national movement to gain what they saw as their rightfully due medical treatment.

The first problem that they encountered, however, was that independent agencies had conducted research that yielded inconclusive results on the possible correlation of the mysterious medical conditions and Agent Orange. It has been especially problematic for researchers to establish an adequate "exposure index" which could quantitatively measure and compare the level of dioxin in veterans. Veterans and the government have often given vastly contradictory accounts of their probable exposure in Vietnam. Some cancers have been associated with statistical confidence to Agent Orange, while other current studies largely refute claims that the level of dioxin most "at risk veterans" would have been exposed to in Vietnam is damaging to sperm and a cause of birth defects.[2] During the Movement, adequate medical information explaining veterans' illnesses was unavailable. Legislators and veterans mistrusted the government agencies charged with designing and implementing the epidemiological studies, namely the Veterans Administration and US Air Force.

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[2] National Institute of Medicine, Veterans and Agent Orange, (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1994), 606.

Throughout the late 1970's and into the early 1980s, the VA held that more data needed to be collected before it could design an appropriate policy. Veterans and their families interpreted the VA's overtures to the public for patience as conspiratorial. The chemical corporations and VA claimed ignorance as to the cause of the veterans' maladies. They asserted that there was a void of definitive scientific data that could be used to resolve the issues. Both veterans and VA employees have described their relationship as hostile. Many veterans felt they had been lied to for several years during the War. To them, the VA's stand on Agent Orange was simply a continuation of that tendency.

Recent information has shown that key officers in charge of overseeing the US Air Force Agent Orange study may have purposefully altered data. The information alleges that Air Force researchers manipulated results to show non-linkage of disease and Agent Orange. Veterans often wondered that if Agent Orange wasn't to blame for their condition, then some alternative must explain their sickness. Author Robert Klein articulates:

> If, indeed Agent Orange is not the culprit, then what is causing the same symptoms in hundreds of thousands of men with shared backgrounds and experiences? Something happened to these veterans and their families, in Vietnam- *something* is making them sick and die- and whether it was Agent Orange is almost irrelevant. The symptoms- the deaths, the defects, the distress- are all obviously service-connected. That is the bottom line. That is what matters. To say otherwise is un-American, in-humane, and yes, a cover-up.[3]

Activist veterans sought medical and financial compensation from the US government. Their desire for recognition from the American people for the immense physical and emotional anguish they endured as a result of the Vietnam conflict was more

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[3] Robert Klein, Wounded Men, Broken Promises (London: Collier Macmillian, 1981), 173.

obscure. All veterans had to contend with the stereotypes and stigmas associated with being a "Vietnam Veteran." They felt entitled to explanations from their countrymen about why their sacrifices and pain were being overlooked.

The potential that their children risked being born with birth defects as a result of Agent Orange exposure represented a poisoned and lost future. Veterans demanding compensation were also fighting for their children, whom they feared would be unfairly haunted by their fathers' actions in Vietnam. The wife of Vietnam veteran, cancer victim and amputee James P. Kilroy Jr. recalls a conversation with her son that is indicative of the lasting feelings behind the Compensation movement:

> In terms of my own son, I would definitely oppose his ever entering the military service, in peacetime or in wartime. We told Jeffrey when Jim was going to lose his arm, that the tumors Jim had were caused by his fighting in Vietnam. Jeff said, 'Does everybody that goes into war, most people come out and they're sick?' And when he asked if this is what was going to happen to him, I remember getting very emotional and saying, 'No, there's no way this is ever going to happen to you.'[4]

Mrs. Kilroy's feelings are emblematic of the group of Vietnam veterans and their families who in varying degrees turned to their government and neighbors for answers. The nation struggled to address their difficult questions concerning sacrifice, patriotism and suffering that loomed over post-Vietnam America.

This thesis will show that the Agent Orange Compensation Movement can be used as a filter to better understand the Vietnam veteran experience. The activist veterans that participated in the Movement share the commonality of Agent Orange and Vietnam. The Compensation movement is a valuable historical tool to examine the significance of the Vietnam War to veterans. To a certain extent, the history of the Movement allows for a greater interpretation of the Vietnam veteran experience through the search for

similarities in their feelings, perceptions, and questions. These similarities can be used to formulate some broader generalizations of the Vietnam experience for vets.

Veterans frequently note that Vietnam influenced each individual differently and that there is an incredible range of diversity among these experiences. Though the stories they relate are similar, veterans often illustrate vastly contrasting sketches of the meaning of their service in Vietnam. The opinions of activist veterans are easily seen in their speeches and writings. These outspoken veterans felt a moral obligation to ask their government and countrymen the larger meanings of the war and the value of their sacrifices. It is this sentiment that can be seen through the lens of the Compensation movement.

Undoubtedly, the focus of the Movement was to secure health care and financial compensation for those stricken with Agent Orange linked maladies. Less obvious was the dialogue politicians, veterans, and the media engaged America in when discussing the legacy of the Vietnam War. Ailing veterans and those with children born with birth defects frequently argued that the havoc Agent Orange brought to their lives should be seen as the real legacy of war. Again, as this thesis will show, how the nation chose to deal with these families' turmoil caused by exposure to Agent Orange was a microcosm for how America chose to construct the legacy of the Vietnam War. The Movement provides a medium to examine not only how vets perceived America, but also how America perceived them. Moreover, both veterans' and Americas' conceptualizations of the Vietnam War were articulated in the rhetoric of the Movement.

Activists felt that if the government refused to provide the service and support afflicted veterans and their families required, then the country would also not recognize

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[4] Janice Rogovin, Let Me Tell You Where I've Been (Mercantile Press, 1988), not paginated.

the reality of the long-term consequences of any war. Veterans who felt that their lives had been devastated by the Vietnam War and Agent Orange believed they were living proof of the ramifications of war. Their supporters held that if the country was willing to send soldiers to fight in distant lands, then it was also responsible for providing them with services and care upon their return. They asserted it was the nation's responsibility to fulfill the unwritten moral contract signed by a veteran. Furthermore, veterans felt that post-service benefits were the nation's expression of gratitude for their service. Participants in the Movement believed that if they failed in their mission for compensation, then the legacy of the Vietnam War would continue to haunt America for years to come. They also fought to ensure future generations of Americans that the legacy of the Vietnam War would not be laden with neglect and lies. They wanted to promise the soldiers of tomorrow that regardless of the outcome of their war, America will always recognize its moral obligation to care for them and their families. Through this action, the country must acknowledge the true human cost of war, however painful or embarrassing the consequences.

Like the Vietnam War, interpreting the influences that contributed and shaped Agent Orange activism is difficult. The rhetoric of all parties involved shares common themes. Nearly everyone involved was trying to grasp what Vietnam meant and would mean to them in the future. Some veterans felt that through the search for a greater meaning out of the Vietnam experience, they might somehow find resolution in their own lives. It was their hope that the painful lessons they learned would not be repeated by their children.

Today, most Americans are hard pressed to identify these lessons. Vietnam has become symbolic for America's involvement in fruitless military actions despite the fact that Agent Orange activists have made their best efforts to assure that the term "Vietnam" does not become synonymous with a senseless waste of life. In 1999, Congress has expressed its ambivalence over a heightened US presence that may involve ground troops in the former Yugoslavia. Without well defined goals for American involvement in Kosovo, some members of Congress have "invoked the quagmire of Vietnam to call for the United States to withdraw."[5] Most Americans do not want another Vietnam. Today's leaders are hesitant to support any foreign policy bearing any resemblance to our strategy in Vietnam.

The AO Compensation movement serves as a historical device to better assess how the Vietnam experience could have such a lasting effect on the future leaders and character of America. Although the Movement has slowly declined since 1984, the memories of the Vietnam War and the effects of Agent Orange have lived on in the lives of veterans. Historian George C. Herring comments:

> Nations, like people, have long memories, and Vietnam will continue to exert a powerful influence on U.S. attitudes toward foreign policy until another cataclysmic event takes place. It is important that we study it, and learn from it. However, we must keep in mind that history does not prescribe explicit lessons, and we must be aware of the many pitfalls and false trails down which it can lead us. We must recognize...that the 'true use' of history is 'not to make men clever for the next time' but 'to make them wise for ever.'[6]

The Agent Orange controversy has taught us that war does not end when the last soldier has left the battlefield and all treaties have been signed. To varying degrees, it touches

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[5] Alison Mitchell, "House Vote Could Block Land Troops," The Oregonian, 29 April 1999, sec. A1, p 1.
[6] George Herring, "'The Vietnam Analogy' and the 'Lessons' of History," in The Vietnam War as History, eds. Elizabeth Jane Errington and B.J.C. McKercher (New York: Praeger, 1990), 14.

the lives of all veterans and their families.

# THE VIETNAM ERA AND AGENT ORANGE

The first symptoms I noticed were a gut-ache and my sinuses plugged up. I remember getting so nauseous it affected my balance. I was dizzy all the time. I got horrible diarrhea. My shit was black with blood. My urine turned coca-brown and burned horribly. I got this incredible headache- not your 'oh-God-I-better-take-an aspirin' type of headache, but a full fledged 'axe-between-the-eyes' variety. My legs became almost worthless. They'd buckle as I walked and I'd end up flat on the ground. My hands and feet went numb. My legs stayed cold, cold all the time. I couldn't get 'em warm. I was running high fever and chills, shooting pains that began in my toes, shot through my whole body and blew out the top of my head. All the joints in my body not just ached- I don't know how to put it- it was pure misery. I was popping zits all around my eyes, my nose, my temples, my ears, the back of my neck, down my back. Coarse, black curly hair started growing on my shoulders and back- for years, my back was almost furry. It was strange hair, the roots were all painful, the damn things would in-grow all the time. My skin got real pasty and would tear real easy. You'd just brush up against something and get a wound out of it. I had scars that would ooze all the time, a lot of infections… but the thing that was worst was going on in my head. I hit bottom. I've still got letters that I wrote- one to my brother back home- I was almost suicidal at that point.[7]

*-Vietnam Veteran Paul Merrel, describing health conditions he believes were caused by exposure to dioxin in Agent Orange*

Our nation has long recognized that it owes a great debt to those who served in the US armed forces. This recognition supports federal law and regulations requiring the executive branch of the federal government, through the US Department of Veteran's Affairs to provide free medical care and tax-free monthly cash payments and other benefits to certain surviving family members of veterans whose deaths are related to military service.[8]

*-Summary of US Veterans Administration Mission Statement*

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[7] Carol Van Strum, A Bitter Fog (San Francisco: Sierra Book Club, 1983), 32.
[8] Dennis K. Rhoades and Michael R. Leaveck, The Legacy of Vietnam Veterans and Their Families (Washington D.C.: Norcott, 1995), 301.

## Defoliation & Dioxin

The dense jungle foliage that covered nearly all of Vietnam provided ample opportunity for Viet Cong communist guerillas to wage an unconventional war. American forces were often frustrated by the advantages and security the landscape provided their opposition. The US government abstained from signing the 1925 Geneva Protocol; a treaty that formally banned the usage and production of chemical weapons such as Agent Orange.[9]

Agent Orange is a chemical compound, composed of 50% 2,4-D (Dichlorophenoxyacetic acid) and 50% 2,4,5-T (Trichlorophenoxyacetic acid). An unavoidable synthetic by-product of 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T is 2,3,7,8- TCDD (tetra-chlorodibenzo-para-dioxin). TCDD (more widely known as *dioxin*) contamination of Agent Orange is proportionally a small percentage of the compound, averaging two parts per million. After large-scale usage of Agent Orange began in Vietnam, research on herbicide yielded a virtually uniform conclusion from the scientific community, warning that the synthetic by-product in Agent Orange, dioxin, is "the most toxic man-made substance known."[10]

The American military pushed for the development of an herbicide that could weaken guerrilla forces by destroying crops and their means of camouflage. Research and field-testing had begun in the early 1960's. By 1962 the US government had begun spraying herbicides nicknamed Agents Green, Pink, Purple, White, Blue and Orange. The chemicals were identified by the colored bands wrapped around the 55-gallon storage drums used for shipping. Although there had been significant public outcry in

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[9] Danial Keller, prod., Vietnam, The Secret Agent documentary film (Green Mountain Post Films, 1983).
[10] Klein, 159.

protest of the possible long-term ecological devastation caused by the herbicides, the government responded that there was no substantial evidence suggesting negative long-term effects to warrant concern. Herbicides were counted as another component of America's technologically advanced military arsenal. Agent Orange enabled the military to: "strip the thick jungle canopy that helped conceal the enemy, destroy their crops and to clear tall grass and bushes from around the perimeters of US base camps and outlying fire support bases."[11]

From 1962 to 1971 an estimated total of 19 million gallons of herbicide was sprayed by US aircraft, ground vehicles, boats and soldiers toting back-mounted packs. Of this amount, the herbicide Agent Orange was sprayed most abundantly. Varying reports estimate 11.2 million gallons of Agent Orange was sprayed in Vietnam.[12] At that time, scientists were not entirely clear on the specific mechanisms in Agent Orange that halted plant growth. One explanation of how Agent Orange acts on plant life relates:

> ...In a general sense, the foliage 'grows itself to death.' The inappropriate growth stimulation causes mismatches among plant parts, so that the vessels that carry nutrient and manufactured products cannot function properly. Its effects are similar to what would happen to an automobile if random parts grew several inches, distorting original proportions.[13]

When the spraying of Agent Orange was halted in 1971, approximately 3.6 million acres of South Vietnam had been defoliated.[14]

On December 4, 1961 President John F. Kennedy initiated a US Air Force project that called for the tactical aerial spraying of this most toxic man-made substance ever known. The program was given the nickname *Operation Ranch Hand.* 1250 men served

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[11] National Institute of Medicine, 85.
[12] National Institute of Medicine, 1.
[13] Michael Gough, Dioxin, Agent Orange, The Facts (New York: Plenum, 1986), 52.
[14] National Institute of Medicine, 1.

in Ranch Hand units during its ten year existence. A computerized system for recording the amount of monthly herbicide spraying totals, HERBS, accompanied the crews on every mission flown in the converted cargo planes rigged for spraying Agent Orange.

Herbicide has encountered opposition and controversy almost since its inception. Concern over the possible detrimental ecological and health consequences of herbicides gained national recognition in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's novel, *Silent Spring*. Carson's predictions of global catastrophe if efforts were not made to curb the increasing usage of pollutants motivated politicians and citizens to re-evaluate America's increasing reliance on herbicides. Twenty-nine American scientists formally protested and called for the abolition of the US military's herbicide spraying in Vietnam in January, 1966. Thirteen months later, a petition with signatures of more than 5,000 scientists, among them seventeen Nobel Laureates, was sent to President Lyndon B. Johnson demanding the immediate cancellation of the herbicide campaign in Vietnam.

Denying the scientific community's claims of ecological disaster and human health risks, the Pentagon not only continued spraying, it increased its use of Agent Orange. Ranch Hand personnel were most active from 1967 to 1969; the increase in herbicide spraying paralleling America's expansion of our military presence in Vietnam. Finally, after a decade of controversy, and under the weight of significant public outcry, the Pentagon officially suspended herbicide spraying in Vietnam on October 31, 1971.[15]

## Birth of a Movement

The wife of Charles Owen was counted among those who suspected dioxin caused illness. Her husband, a Vietnam veteran, believed his terminal cancer was caused by exposure to Agent Orange. Mrs. Owen telephoned VA benefits counselor Maude DeVictor in 1977. Unknowingly, DeVictor began a social movement that would embolden and empower Vietnam veterans. DeVictor embarked upon an unauthorized study of the empirical relationship she suspected between Agent Orange exposure and veterans' illness/ disease. She compiled statistics and conducted interviews. Upon hearing of her research, the VA fired her. DeVictor's statistics and theories of a correlation of Agent Orange exposure and veterans' illness/ disease reached a national audience when a Chicago TV station used her research as the foundation of a documentary titled *Agent Orange, the Deadly Fog.*[16]

Agent Orange Victims International fueled the veterans' drive for compensation. It gave the Movement cohesion and provided veterans with information on their rights along with ways they could become involved. The first voice and founder of the compensation movement found its form in Paul Reutershan. Reutershan was a twenty-eight year old former helicopter crew chief in Vietnam who vividly recalled flying daily through clouds of herbicides. He shocked America when he appeared on the *USA Today* morning television show and claimed: "I died in Vietnam and didn't even know it."[17] Although Reutershan's statement was unsubstantiated at that time, he was one of a growing number of veterans who believed there was a connection between Agent Orange exposure and their mysteriously deteriorating health. Reutershan also attacked the VA

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[15] National Institute of Medicine, 27.
[16] National Institute of Medicine, 33.

for denying medical treatment and benefits to veterans and their families victimized by Agent Orange. Reutershan established Agent Orange Victims International in the late 1970s. As the founder and president, Reutershan was devoted to fighting for veterans' rights. It is plausible that without Agent Orange Victims International or another organization functioning in a samilar capacity, the Compensation movement might never have solidified into a publicized campaign for veterans' rights. When Reutershan died of colon cancer in December 1978, he was acknowledged as the symbolic martyr and father of the Vietnam Veterans Agent Orange Compensation Movement.

The VA continued to deny that there was a causal relationship between Agent Orange and veterans' poor health. The VA refused payment benefits for veterans filing claims with "Agent Orange" written in the space specifying cause of injury and illness.[18] The agency responded to veterans' complaints by asserting that they had no evidence linking Agent Orange and their alleged ailments. Veterans accused the VA of ordering an unpublished, secret directive to its benefits counselors to "deny all Agent Orange claims unless the claimed condition was chlorachne."[19] Public demand for research on the health effects of dioxin prompted the US Air Force, US General Accounting Office, Center for Disease Control, Environmental Protection Agency and numerous others to conduct more health specific research on Agent Orange. Several Congressional Hearings since 1978 have convened to discuss and resolve issues related to veterans' health and Agent Orange. A caucus of Vietnam Veterans in Congress headed by the outspoken leadership of Representative Tom Daschle from South Dakota, championed the cause of veterans seeking compensation.

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[17] National Institute of Medicine, 33.
[18] Klein, 162.

Reutershan's legacy included a lawsuit he had filed in New York seeking damages from Dow Chemical Corporation and two other chemical companies. The named companies had produced and sold Agent Orange to the US government. Reutershan had hoped that his activism would educate veterans and the American public about the harmfulness of Agent Orange.[20] Shortly after Reutershan's death, his friend, Frank McCarthy, assumed the presidency of Agent Orange Victims International. Veterans filed a highly publicized class action lawsuit, naming seven chemical companies as defendants. Vietnam Veterans, their spouses, their parents and their children were identified as the plaintiffs on January 8, 1979 under the guidance of environmental attorney Victor J. Yannacone Jr. The US government was excluded as a defendant in the case under the protection of the Feres Doctrine which "precludes recovery from against the United States government for injuries that arise out of or in the course of activity incident to military service."[21]

## Class Action

Yannacone maneuvered the class action lawsuit into the national spotlight and the attention garnered by the case presented a three-way discourse involving veterans, the chemical manufacturers, and the US government. The American public became the fourth participant in the dialogue by means of the intense media focus given to the issue. Veterans, in particular, believed that legal victory would end the skepticism surrounding their claims of poor health. Activist veterans placed considerable personal and emotional stock on its outcome. Legal historian Peter H. Schuck elaborates:

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[19] Rhoades, 302.
[20] Peter H. Schuck, Agent Orange On Trial, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986), 37.

> To many veterans… the case was a morality play performed on a stage- the court. From that stage they hoped to express their deepest aspirations for justice, retribution, fraternity, and social (or perhaps even cosmic) coherence. Searching for some explanation for the devastating physical and psychological conditions that many veterans suffered upon their return, they fastened upon Agent Orange.[22]

To outspoken veterans, a courtroom victory held the symbolic significance of an impartial party validating their claims while severely reprimanding the manufacturers and the US government for negligence. The media sympathized with the veterans. The chemical companies and US government were frequently chastised by journalists for their stand on Agent Orange. A *Boston Globe* editorial (December 9, 1979) reads:

> For thousands of Vietnam veterans, the US government's failure to resolve questions about the use and side effects of Agent Orange, a toxic defoliant, is part of its larger failure to address the needs of those who served their country in Southeast Asia… Making matters worse, veterans who are sick must live with the uncertainty of not knowing why, while others who haven't been affected must live with the fear that they one day may be.[23]

A *Washington Post* editorial published three months later comments:

> One of the bitterest legacies of the Vietnam War has been the generally shoddy treatment accorded its veterans by the government they served and by the general public to whom the veterans- some jobless, drug-addicted, maimed are a painful reminder of a time they would rather forget. High among the veterans' continuing troubles is the uncertainty over what health damage they may have suffered from exposure to the wartime defoliant Agent Orange.[24]

Frank McCarthy, Reutershan's successor, spearheaded the publicity campaign to attract as much attention as possible to the lawsuit. McCarthy took advantage of the national interest in Agent Orange and veteran's issues cultivated by the lawsuit to enlist the sympathy and support of the American public. With the passion that became his

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[21] National Institute of Medicine, 34.
[22] Schuck, 255.
[23] Editorial, "Sidestepping A Life and Death Issue," Boston Sunday Globe, 9 December 1979.

hallmark, McCarthy led the more militant faction of activist veterans, though he had never suffered from any Agent Orange related illness. Outlining his organizations' goals, he details:

> We want to turn the American people around so that the Vietnam combat soldier will no longer be abused and dishonored. We want to get the benefits that we are entitled to. We want to find out what is killing us. And we want the American taxpayer not to have to pay for injuries the chemical companies caused.[25]

Dow and other chemical corporations had to contend with anti-chemical sentiments that were one result of the emergence of the environmental movement in the 1970s. They were in a precarious situation; public opinion dictated that they had to empathize with the plight of the sick veterans. At the same time, the companies resolutely maintained Agent Orange was not linked to human health problems. The lawsuit held varying degrees of significance for all of those involved in the controversy. "Like other complex social phenomena" the lawsuit "can plausibly be understood in many different ways…like the fabled elephant 'seen' differently by each blind man, the Agent Orange case is a melange of stories, each true from some vantage point, each false from another, and all incomplete and thus inevitably misleading."[26] Yannnacone asserted that not only were the chemical manufacturers liable for illnesses caused by Agent Orange exposure, but that they had foreknowledge in the early 1960s that defoliants posed a great risk to human health.

When mothers began to accuse the government and chemical companies of denying a legitimate association of Agent Orange and birth defects, they demanded proof to the contrary. Activist veterans were wary of epidemiological studies designed and

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[24] Editorial, "More on Agent Orange," The Washington Post, 21 March 1980.
[25] Schuck, 44.

implemented by any branch of government even remotely tied to the VA. They argued that researcher bias and politics would influence the integrity of such research. Data collected by a variety of different governmental and non-governmental agencies at that time did not show a definitive linkage between exposure and birth defects.

On May 6, 1984, the night before the trial was set to begin the two sides reached a landmark settlement. The chemical companies agreed to establish a trust fund of $180 million for the benefit of afflicted veterans and their families. Terms of the settlement required that the trust fund finance a cash payment program for completely disabled veterans and survivors of deceased veterans, a class assistance foundation to aid needy veterans for medical, social, and legal services, as well as a legal fund for New Zealand and Australian victims.[27] Although the case was settled out of court, it is important to note that "no causal relationship was ever established between the alleged health effects in Vietnam veterans and their exposure to Agent Orange."[28] The presiding federal court judge, Judge Weinstein, remarked at the time of settlement that "proof has not been produced in this court sufficient to go to jury."[29]

## The Congressional Debate

While Weinstein and the courts were skeptical of Agent Orange induced illnesses, Vietnam veterans found their legislative advocates in Congressmen Tom Daschle and David Bonior. They belonged to a select group of members, many of whom were Vietnam veterans. Daschle lead the movement in Congress for hearings aiming to

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[26] Schuck, 255.
[27] National Institute of Medicine, 34.
[28] National Institute of Medicine, 35.
[29] National Institute of Medicine, 35.

resolve Agent Orange concerns of: "access to health care for (then) current problems that might be related to exposure, scientific answers to questions about the health effects of exposure, and compensation for disabilities possibly related to exposure."[30] The first US Senate hearing on the health and environmental effects of dioxin was held in 1970. Subsequent Senate and Congressional hearings have been held from 1978 to the present day. Veterans Administrators officials, afflicted veterans, physicians and scientists have been among the witnesses participating in the hearings. The National Institute of Medicine has classified Agent Orange legislation as belonging to one of the following three groups: "health care- access to VA medical centers for veterans exposed to Agent Orange; scientific research- the human health effects of exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam, and how to best address the special needs of those veterans who may have been exposed to it, and compensation."[31]

The relationship between the VA and pro-veteran legislators has been marked with tension, each accusing the other of acting on a political agenda rather than in the veterans' best interest. In 1981, Public Law 97-72 granted veterans medical care for suspected Agent Orange illnesses, unless the malady could be linked to a different source. Public Law 99-272 (1986) mandated the VA to conduct a study on the long-term health risks posed to women who served in Vietnam during the spraying. The Agent Orange Act of 1991 provided disability payments for Agent Orange induced soft-tissue sarcomas, chlorachne, and non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. The VA has maintained that its mission is to provide medical services for service-connected injuries and that research results have not definitely linked Agent Orange with many veteran claims. They contend

[30] National Institute of Medicine, 46-47.
[31] National Institute of Medicine, 47.

that their stand on Agent Orange is not derived from a political agenda. Rather, they have appealed to lawmakers and the American public to detach themselves emotionally from other issues when evaluating the scientific merits of the Agent Orange evidence. Some veterans felt that the US government wanted to distance itself as much as possible from the Vietnam experience. They reasoned that the VA denied Agent Orange was the cause of veterans' sicknesses in an attempt to extract itself from the responsibility of the long-term consequences of the conflict. Author Robert Klein writes:

> What the VA is really saying is that its scientists see no connection, and that the veterans' data are just not proof beyond a reasonable doubt. What the VA is also saying is that money, squandered so freely to get grunts over there to kill for America, is not available for those who have come home. Unlike used bullets, however, soldiers can get cancer.[32]

Disabled Vietnam veteran Max Cleland served as the VA's chief administrator during the Compensation movement. Cleland often took the brunt of the veterans' accusations of negligence and irresponsibility. During his tour of duty in Vietnam, Cleland was sprayed with Agent Orange. Cleland encountered numerous difficulties during the Agent Orange debate. Foremost, as the head of the VA immediately following the Vietnam War, his agency lacked the staffing and funding to deal with something of the magnitude of the Agent Orange debate. Secondly, his department was explicitly bound by law to provide medical benefits to individuals and their families who sustained definitive service-connected injuries. One VA administrator testified: "The law does not provide that the veterans are given the benefit of the doubt…Given the current lack of scientific substantiation of latent adverse health effects of Agent Orange, we currently

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[32] Klein, 162.

have no basis for service connecting such illnesses as cancer on the basis of exposure alone."[33]

Activist veterans often portrayed Max Cleland as their adversary during the Movement. Veterans and their supporters might have felt betrayed by a fellow veteran who had been exposed to Agent Orange and severely wounded in Vietnam, but seemed to not sympathize with their plight. He realized that whatever his decisions and policy, someone would question his motivations. Assessing his function, he remarked: "we would like to be perceived as the advocate although we are sometimes perceived as the adversary."[34] Congressman Bob Edgar best summarized Cleland's position in the controversy when during a hearing he asked a witness:

> If you were Max Cleland given the authority of the President of the United States of America today, what would you do to begin the process of putting the pieces of this puzzle together? What would be your orders to your chief medical officers and to your hospitals throughout the United States, apart from any legislative response we might make?[35]

Undoubtedly Cleland felt political pressure from a variety of different groups and individuals throughout the process. The Agent Orange controversy has yet to be entirely resolved and maybe never will be. There was not one single event or piece of legislation that ended the discourse. Much like the Vietnam War, the issue is not clearly understood and to this day is subject to interpretation. Likewise, Max Cleland's actions during his tenure as Chief Administrator are difficult to qualitatively categorize. It is hard to discern whether his policies were primarily dictated by a political agenda and should be seen as an extension of his perspectives on the War. The themes of national, personal, and moral

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[33] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Oversite Hearing to Receive Testimony on Agent Orange, 96th Cong., 2nd sess., 25 February, 96.
[34] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Oversite, 111.
[35] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Oversite, 317.

integrity are a commonality in the words of all the participants on either side of the debate.

The Vietnam Era closed on a note that was almost as confusing as its beginning. The years that American dollars, soldiers, politics, and emotions were devoted to involvement in Vietnam resulted in an ambiguous conclusion. When President Gerald Ford asked for closure to America's Vietnam experience in 1975, the Agent Orange ordeal was just beginning. Vietnam veterans were prompted to action in the Compensation movement for different reasons in the decade following the War. At that time, most would concede that their war was still very real to them. For some veterans, by just questioning the connection of their health maladies to Agent Orange, the VA was also degrading the value of their service and sacrifice. Speaking passionately at a Congressional hearing on why veterans' issues deserved national attention, Representative Bon Edgar said:

> Someone once said that in war there are no unwounded soldiers. For that reason, and with your help, I think it's the job of Congress to heal the wounds of the Vietnam war... By proclamation President Ford declared the end of the Vietnam-era in 1975. The so-called Vietnam era ended with a proclamation they say. But I think all of us recognize, or we would not be here today, that the war still goes on. It goes on in the minds and the lives of those who participated in the war; it goes on in the lives of the families who have been affected by chemicals such as Agent Orange or other kinds of physical or psychological problems related to that war.[36]

Through the medium of the AO controversy, politicians and the American public were challenged to resolve larger questions concerning the value of sacrifice. They also sought to influence the legacy of the Vietnam War on veterans and their families. As the Vietnam War has become further removed from the memories of Americans, so have the issues encompassing the Agent Orange debate. For some Vietnam veterans the

disturbing memories still remain. One Vietnam veteran explains: "The thing I learned from Vietnam is... that it doesn't take a whole lot of time to go from 'civilized' to 'uncivilized'... maybe a couple of days. Yet, going from 'uncivilized' to 'civilized' is a lot harder."[37] Like a Vietnam veteran experiencing difficulties returning to "civilized," some factions of America also found readjustment in the wake of the war considerably challenging.

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[36] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 3.
[37] Anonymous Vietnam Veteran, interview by author, Springfield, OR., 5 November 1998.

# THE VIETNAM VETERAN EXPERIENCE

> I remember from college a Greek myth about 300 Spartans and a king... King Leonidas took 300 of his personal bodyguards to hold a pass, because the country was holding their ceremonies and the country was being invaded. So King Leonidas took 300 Spartans and he marched to a pass called Thermopylae. And he was to hold the pass and the senate was to send on the army in a couple of days. But the army never came.
>
> And King Leonidas sent word back to the senate, the same word I'm saying to the Senate and Congress here. He said, 'Go tell the senate and Greece that we Spartans stand true- we stand.' I can't remember exactly. But in essence what he was saying was they had made the ultimate sacrifice. They had stayed there because the senate had said that they would send the army. They were making the ultimate sacrifice even though they knew that there was no army to come. And he wanted to let them know that they would stand obedient to their word. And I'm saying now to the Senate and the Congress and the President of the United States, we have stood obedient to their word.
>
> I remember a phrase from John F. Kennedy when he said 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.' And it's very obvious around us that that we did not ask what our country could for us; it's what we could do for our country. And now that we- even to the point that even our lives and our limbs- and we got nothing in return. No recognition. Not even proper medical care since our return.[38]
>
> *-Larry Mitchell, Vietnam Veteran, (Congressional Hearing Testimony)*
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> You go overseas to make provisions for America to stand on its own, then you come back and she stands on you.[39]
>
> *-Annoyomous, Army Veteran*

During the course of the Vietnam War, over 3 million American troops were sent to Vietnam. Their differences in personality, politics, education, wealth, social status, race and ethnicity spanned a wide spectrum. Some enlisted for service out of a feeling of

[38] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 40-41.
[39] Klein, 66.

patriotism, while others who were drafted had the decision made for them. It is virtually impossible to generalize the "Vietnam Experience" given this large range of diversity. Several factors distinguish service in Vietnam from the American campaigns in WWI, WWII and Korea. These influences contributed to some Vietnam veteran's disillusionment when they returned to the US. Contrasting the images of entire WWII companies returning from Europe, Vietnam veterans returned home alone. A tour of duty in Vietnam lasted thirteen months. Historians note that as men constantly rotated in and out of units during the war, there was not as much opportunity for soldiers to form lasting friendships as in previous wars. The tumultuous domestic social and political climate in America during the late 1960s and throughout the mid-1970s meant that veterans were not often well received upon their return. Author Michael Gough insists:

> ...They returned to a country that granted no heroes and parades. Rather the reception was cold at best. To some extent both *hawks* and *doves* blamed the veterans for the failed effort in Vietnam. Hawks found it difficult to understand how we 'lost' to a third or fourth rate power. Doves could not excuse veterans for responding to the country's calls and carrying out orders they denounced as anathema to the country's soul.[40]

It is difficult to generalize the affect of the Vietnam War on both veterans and the public. Only a small percentage of those people would have considered themselves to have been activists immediately following America's withdrawal from Vietnam. Though difficult to measure, historians argue there was considerably more public dissent with America's actions in Vietnam than there had been in either WWII or Korea. Vietnam veterans also felt they were unfairly burdened with negative stereotypes. Veterans felt that these stereotypes fueled economic and social inequalities. They complained that universities and employers assumed that Vietnam veterans were emotionally unstable and drug

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[40] Gough, 44.

addicted, among other things, and therefore were risky investments as potential students or employees. While veterans encountered different socio-economic challenges in post-war America, most relate some degree of difficulty associated with reintegration into American society.

Congressman Leon Panetta, then vice chairman of Vietnam Veterans in Congress, a group of legislators headed by Tom Daschele, poignantly remarked: "Millions have been affected by the Vietnam war and by the casualties not only of the war itself, but even the greater casualties that have taken place after the war."[41] Rates of joblessness, incarceration, suicide and divorce were significantly higher for veterans than the general population's averages.[42] Anti-war and social activists of the 1960s era voiced the fact that minorities and the poor were unjustly sent to Vietnam while the privileged obtained college deferments or stateside military appointments. Minorities encountered unequal opportunity to education and employment at that time. These groups faced both institutional and social injustices that contributed to their plight. This faction of America was over-represented among enlisted soldiers during the Vietnam War. Statistically most Vietnam veterans were not officers and did not aspire to careers in the military. These veterans comprised the segment of the military that had the least education and training. Due to their race, ethnicity or social class, Vietnam veterans often encountered other forms of discrimination. Given the struggles of the poor and minorities in 1960s America, it is difficult to gauge whether their status as Vietnam veterans was the primary cause of unequal opportunities or if it simply contributed to a larger recipe for discrimination.

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[41] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 6.

Regardless of causation, veterans constituted one of the most disadvantaged groups in America. Peter H. Schuck writes that "veterans were greeted with double-digit inflation, rising unemployment, and spiraling interest rates, and many simply could not compete in this turbulent economic setting."[43] The AO Compensation Movement provided a platform for veterans to voice their concerns. Politicians too, effectively used the national spotlight on Agent Orange to raise concerns over the questions of how to educate and train veterans to successfully rejoin American society. Some veterans felt that they were promised these opportunities as payment for their military service. Veterans' anger may have partially arisen out of interpreting this lack of educational and vocational opportunity as the government's failure to address their needs. They also interpreted the government's actions as not recognizing the value of their service and sacrifice. Vietnam Veteran Tom Paster testified that veterans' had "feelings of isolation and hopelessness." He appealed to Americans stating that these feelings meant that "Vietnam veterans need a place to get job training, education, medical care, screening, peer counseling, as well as workshops and much more."[44] Congressman Panetta affirmed the sentiment that "the attention of the American people must be focused on commitments that were made to these veterans...." He expanded on this issue by claiming that any "failure to live up to many of these commitments, whether in health care or education, or just in the simple response of Government to those who were willing to sacrifice their lives to serve that Government"[45] was unacceptable.

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[42] George Swiers, "'Demented Vets' and Other Myths," in Vietnam Reconsidered, ed. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 97.
[43] Schuck, 21.
[44] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 15.
[45] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 6.

The Compensation movement allowed for a dialogue on the responsibility of the government for the psychological and physical suffering caused by the Vietnam War. The controversy on causality of Agent Orange and veterans' maladies was a metaphor for the unspoken debate in America on culpability for the devastating legacy of the War on veterans. The furor over Agent Orange was an opportunity for activist veterans and politicians to assess the meaning of the war. Had the War ended with a decisive American/ South Vietnamese victory, perhaps the Agent Orange controversy might never have included discussions of responsibility for suffering. Vietnam veterans felt disillusioned that their friends' deaths might have been in vane for a military effort that many of their countrymen never wanted anyway. Individuals, like Representative Tom Harkin, argued that the aftermath of the Vietnam War should not be shouldered by just veterans. He felt that despite the outcome of the conflict or its original aims, all Americans were indebted to them for their service. He asserted:

> Regardless of how we may feel about the war itself or what we may think our Government ought to or ought not to do in terms of looking back at the war, we've got to agree that those who fought in that war and those who still carry the scars of that war, whether physical or psychological, should be assisted by our Government...It was a traumatic experience for the Nation. As a nation we want to forget it. I can understand that. But all too often the men and women who fought there are forgotten too. In so doing we deny them the dignity, the respect and the honor that they deserve.[46]

America was at a unique historical juncture immediately following the Vietnam War. Although many still feel that America had achieved an honorable, peaceful conclusion to the conflict, veterans often comment on their disappointment when North Vietnamese troops captured Saigon in 1975.[47] People such as Harkin suggested that

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[46] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 5-6.
[47] Rhode.

gratitude was due veterans for their service and sacrifice, independent of the war's outcome. Michael D. Englett, a decorated combat medic reveals in his testimony at an Agent Orange hearing:

> Vietnam was a war no one wanted in a land that no one knew. It was fought against a foe that no one understood, for a cause that no one really to this day understands. It was a war that lacked clarity and a purpose. And in the end it was not lost, but simply unwon.[48]

The negative stereotypes attached to Vietnam veterans further removed some veterans from rejoining the American mainstream. Throughout the movement, veterans pointed out that such stereotypes ostracized them and detracted from the credibility of their claims of adverse health effects from exposure to dioxin. "We got the stigma of being undesirables, of being William Calleys who ran around killing women and children. We got treated like criminals, instead of like heroes, which we are"[49] explains one veteran. The striking images of WWII veterans returning to ticker-tape parades of cheering crowds, contrasted the reception most Vietnam veterans felt they received. Agent Orange victim Ray Clark explains: "I got sick of the stereotypes...the movies, books, radio, newspapers all had us typed as baby killers, psychos, drug addicts. I just didn't want to walk down the street and have someone say, 'Hey, there goes Ray Clark. He takes drugs, kills babies, rapes women. He's really weird, man.'"[50]

The pervasive negative stereotypes surely weakened veterans' claims that Agent Orange caused sickness and disease. Some veterans might have also wanted to distance themselves from the social stigmas attached to veterans. A considerable number of veterans wanted to put the experience behind them and move towards attaining their post-

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[48] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 71.
[49] Gough, 154.
[50] Fred A. Wilcox., Waiting For an Army to Die (New York: Random House, 1983), 6.

war goals. Veterans feared the social and economic repercussions of stereotypes. News photos and films of activist veterans during the 1970s present images of long haired, ripped-camouflage-fatigue-wearing veterans protesting at government offices or being shackled by policemen. Veterans who conformed more to societal norms in appearance and behavior might have not only avoided being labeled as rapists and baby-killers, but also avoided the perception that they were angry, maladjusted Vietnam veterans. Agent Orange politicized veterans from a multitude of different social groups. Those that chose to participate in the Compensation movement were forced to either confront or embrace these stereotypes. Ron DeBoer, Agent Orange victim and activist tells:

> ...Most of all they just want to leave the whole Vietnam experience in the closet where they feel it belongs. They just don't want to be stereotyped any further. They want to believe that they survived the war, and I ask you, can you really blame them? We may be the first army in history to that has had to keep fighting for our lives after the war is over.[51]

The stigma of being a Vietnam veteran was double-edged. Some veterans perceived that supporters of America's campaign in Vietnam blamed the failure on the soldiers. On the other hand, those against war resented them for having fought in a war they did not support. Veterans became targets of outrage by opposing factions in America. Representative Don Bailey describes:

> It's very difficult to come home and watch television stereotypes, watch the word 'Vietnam' become a symbol word, synonym for debacle or for defeat. Then you feel inside yourself that perhaps people don't understand that as a veteran of the war, from a military point of view it was not your defeat; that there is a great deal more to the policy. Then look at a country that, for a while, turns its head or doesn't face its responsibility. Then you've got to battle those battles on the floor of the Congress or in the streets or wherever because people really don't, in terms of that issue, care.[52]

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[51] Wilcox, 30.
[52] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 4.

Veterans related that America had changed significantly during the course of the Vietnam War. They claimed that the America they had known and left behind before the War had been a more cohesive, unified country. Throughout the years of the Movement, veterans frequently asserted that the War had damaged the character of America. They complained that the War had been so divisive that the consequence was a nation shattered by government lies and public disillusionment over involvement in Vietnam. Returning veterans also felt that they were symbolic of an unpleasant era and that they were blamed for personal and national turmoil. Veterans believed that the American people's desire to blame veterans for the misery of the War was indicative of their distaste at the outcome of American intervention in Vietnam. Veterans felt that they were made into scapegoats for all of the misery from the War. Vietnam veteran and war scholar Paul Camacho elaborates:

> Vietnam veterans are 'homecomers.' We're like Ulysses, we've gone away to do something heroic, something the society values very highly, and when we come back we discover that not only have we changed, but so has the society. We're not welcomed back because now the society doesn't like what they sent us to do. The Left feels we killed too many people and the Right feels we didn't kill enough. How many guys went away with a pat on the back in '67-68 and had trashcans thrown at them when they came back in'68-69. You come to realize that you are an outsider back in America and you are not going to be absorbed back in society.[53]

In the late 1970s, veterans held that they were the victims of the Vietnam War and should be entitled to the nation's compassion and respect, rather than its hostility and blame.

Veterans protested that the VA blamed them for their ailments. One of the reasons the Compensation Movement sparked veteran activism was in response to the VA's portrayal of them as "phonies." The VA consistently implied that many of the

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[53] Rogovin.

veterans' claims of Agent Orange ailments were fraudulent. VA administrators responded to legislators' calls for immediate and total compensation by arguing that they too, were morally bound to wait for the results of thorough epidemiological studies before implementing policy. Congressman Sam Hall explained the VA's stance:

> ...If you don't have to prove actual linkage, if the veteran does not have to prove actual linkage between exposure to Agent Orange and making a recovery, it looks to me like you are letting the gate down, so to speak, for many, many fraudulent claims throughout this country.[54]

Sick veterans often took the VA's stance to mean that veterans were at fault for their illnesses' rather than the government for having sent them to Vietnam. Veterans contended that the outcome of the war and its larger negative social consequences on the American psyche meant that they were to blame for their sicknesses. Congressman Daschle was among the contingent of activist veterans that asserted it was irrelevant whether Agent Orange was responsible for veterans' health maladies. Daschle held that all Americans were responsible for Vietnam veterans' and their families' health ailments regardless of the results of epidemiological studies. He adamantly believed that there was an unspoken moral contract signed by every American citizen with every American soldier sent to Vietnam to care for their emotional, medical and financial needs in honor of their sacrifice. Suzanne Hopkins, widow of a Vietnam veteran contends:

> It is not fair or moral to put the onus on the Vietnam veteran to diagnose and prove his dysfunctions. We, the American people, and the Federal Government as our agents have a contractual obligation to these men and women, to all veterans to provide basic medical care. And we have a moral obligation to provide compassionate, empathetic care to the men and women who defended us in times of war and peace.[55]

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[54] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Oversite, 96.
[55] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 54.

Daschle said that the real issue was not the relative toxicity of Agent Orange. He believed that something much greater, the integrity of the American people was at stake if veterans were not fully compensated. Like Leonidas, American soldiers had responded to its nation's call to arms, yet veterans and others refused to support a government which failed to respond to their needs after the war was over.

Vietnam veterans felt a unique sense of national responsibility upon their return. As survivors of the Vietnam War, some believed that they too were obligated to help America "heal" from the Vietnam War. If America were to set herself back on course, activists agreed, she would first have to return to an honorable means of governing. The path back to honor began by caring for a needy veteran population. Veteran Antonio Reyes claims: "There ain't nothing wrong with me. All I'm having is a healthy reaction. So please, 'America the beautiful,' you're getting ugly, brother. Make it beautiful again, please."[56] Veterans involved in the Compensation movement believed that one of the first steps needed for recovering from the trauma of Vietnam was to resolve the debate surrounding Agent Orange.

One common theme in virtually all Vietnam veterans' social movements was that a certain amount of both national innocence and honor were lost as a result of the Vietnam War. Veterans sought to regain these lost qualities. Michael Burt McCarthy, activist Vietnam veteran tells a Congressional panel convened to investigate Agent Orange compensation: "I also want to thank you for hearing our demands, working to solve the problems they represent, and joining with us to begin the end of the Vietnam

[56] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 80.

war at home, a war that has ravaged the physical, psychological, social and moral fabric of the American people."[57]

As survivors and witnesses of the War, a significant segment of the veteran population felt responsible to educate Americans on the realities of war. Many vets recall the romanticized images of "John Wayne" heroes portrayed to them by movies and through stories told by veterans of earlier wars. Victims of Agent Orange felt compelled to point to their physical and mental misery that were directly linked to Vietnam as evidence of the true legacy of war. Had the outcome of the war been different, it is plausible that veterans might have had much different opinions as educators. Veteran and author George Swiers prescribes:

> A detailed public autopsy on war, and what it did to America, one in which truth is not permitted to become a casualty, should be the permanent issue of Vietnam veterans. For only through a full reckoning, a demand for examination for accountability, can the war's demons be purged.[58]

Veterans thought that the American people would be much more hesitant to commit troops to war because of the failed American military effort in Vietnam. Victims of Agent Orange used their failing health and personal struggles as examples of the true consequences of war.

The controversy surrounding Agent Orange affected how some vets reflected on their actions in Vietnam. Historians have documented that each individual views the atrocities of war according to his/ her personal beliefs. Looking back at the Vietnam War, veterans experiencing ailments related to Agent Orange might have been more critical of their acts because they felt that their own government was not responding to

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[57] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 10.
[58] Swiers, 198.

their needs. If the government maintained that their ailments were not a result of Vietnam, then why would veterans believe that the horrific acts of warfare US soldiers committed in Vietnam were acts of patriotism or heroism. More abstractly, some activist veterans may have been searching for validation that the violence they exacted in Vietnam was not a total waste of human life. Sociologist and anti-war activist John Grady comments:

> One of the most dangerous illusions is that there is some moral value to be drawn from the experience of war. Undeniably, there is something really powerful about the veterans' experience. Everybody who isn't a veteran is forced to wonder how they would have done in this or that situation as they hear it described. It seems that facing those situations was a test of something very important. It told you what you're made of; made you face what kind of person you really are. But as I listen to the experiences of veterans I realize that they are mostly talking about situations where they just did what they did when they did it, and only afterwards, were they able to try and figure out what it all meant.[59]

The post-war era in America profoundly affected how veterans recounted and interpreted their service. While the VA denied definitive linkage to health maladies and Agent Orange, veterans felt even more compelled to educate Americans about the war they saw. Grady continues:

> If there is some kind of understanding that those who went through the war have to convey to the rest of us, it is the knowledge that people can create situations so unspeakably grotesque and so incoherent that all our most cherished human values can, under some conditions, be reduced to nothing more than sheer survival.[60]

The AO Compensation Movement included speculation on a redefinition of patriotism. Having returned to a country that had a multitude of interpretations of patriotism, acknowledging that veterans were entitled to medical benefits was one avenue AO victims felt the government could use to recognize veterans' patriotism. Veterans

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[59] Rogovin.

struggled with the meaning of patriotism. Many wondered if it was still possible to love America and its institutions while part of the population dismissed their service as an act of imperialism and savagery. The former soldiers were angered that their service could be categorized as anything other than patriotic. When the VA refused to meet their needs, veterans accused the agency of not honoring the men who gave their lives and health out of love for America. Congressional Medal of Honor winner and Vietnam veteran Sammy Lee Davis passionately speaks to Congress in support of compensatory legislation:

> ...In the long run, approval of this legislation by the Congress will be a definitive signal to the nation and the rest of the world that a problem does exist from exposure to Agent Orange and the greatest deliberative body this world has ever known wants answers to the problem... I am an American gentlemen, and therefore too proud and bull-headed to beg you. But I humbly request that you do not break faith with those of us who answered the call that came from this very building. Think of the legacy you will leave for the next army you may have to raise to stand under our flag should you turn your backs on us. I can only ask you do what is right.[61]

The Compensation movement had prompted both afflicted and healthy veterans to wonder which definition of patriotism they would pass on to their children. Definitions of patriotism usually contain an element of love and respect for countrymen. Groups such as Agent Orange Victims International believed that veterans had been betrayed by the government and, in effect, by the America people. The battle for benefits can also be seen as a search for a redefinition of patriotism in post-war America.

Veterans and felt that the policies the government adopted to deal with the victims of Agent Orange would factor into the legacy of the Vietnam experience. They

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[60] Rogovin.
[61] U.S. Congress, House, Bob Edgar, Congressional Record, 98th Cong., 1st sess., v129, pt 14, p 19100, July 13, 1983.

articulated that if future generations were to look back at the neglect of American veterans, then these generations would fear the possibility that should they be asked to fight a war, their country might not support them and their families after its completion. Veteran John Avalos remarks:

> I don't know why they don't want to take care of us, I can't understand. But if the American people want to have the finest fighting force on the face of the Earth, then they're going to have to take care of that fighting force when they get home... Our children are looking at us, all America is looking at us. How can I look at my son and tell him, yes, son, go to the service, when I stand here and I sit here in pain because I refuse to take any more medication? How can I look at my son and tell him to go into the service? What does he have to look forward to but agony and pain? ...I still love America and that's why I'm here.[62]

The government had a unique opportunity to set precedence for how veterans would be treated. Vietnam veterans wanted a national policy outlining that American soldiers would always be taken care of regardless of the political climate. An editorial in *The Detroit News* on November 2, 1979 states:

> This act of reparation is long overdue. The soldiers in Vietnam were in a real sense betrayed by the unprecedented politicization of that war. They deserve far more honor and tangible gratitude than they have thus far received from their determinedly forgetful countrymen.[63]

Politicians fighting for veterans' rights also asserted that by providing for ailing veterans, the government would be making important strides toward rekindling the public's trust in the US government lost after the Vietnam War and Watergate. The Vietnam experience lived on in the forms of the veterans involved in the Movement. These individuals encountered personal dilemmas of how to interpret their service. Paul Camacho articulates:

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[62] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 25.
[63] Editorial, "Veterans as Victims," Detroit Free Press, 2 November 1979.

> Most of all what do I teach my children? Do I teach them to value a new form of patriotism and to be prepared to make sacrifices for the common good, or just watch out for themselves? Certainly I can't say put stock in the notion of patriotism which I was exposed to. That was all a trap for fools like myself who got sucked into the fraud of Vietnam.[64]

Activists believed that the way the AO situation was resolved would author a new definition of American patriotism. This new definition would be instrumental in shaping the legacy of America's Vietnam experience.

The legacy of Vietnam veterans and social activist wanted to leave included evolved perspectives of heroism. The Vietnam War left America with a damaged picture of traditional heroism. Until the Vietnam War, unquestionably answering the nation's request for military service had been considered a heroic quality. The reinvented definition of heroism veterans sought, contended that it was more noble to defy the nation's request for military service if such disobedience would perpetuate peace and justice in the United States and abroad. The meaning of sacrifice was often debated in the wake of the failed military effort which left over 58,000 Americans killed or missing. For veterans involved in the Agent Orange movement, heroism meant that they were obligated to continue to fight for veterans' benefits. A contingency of veterans spoke out that heroism during the Vietnam era was independent of politics. They saw their military service as an act of altruism for the benefit of other Americans. Veterans believed that the nation's health was partially dependent on a definition of heroism that could be used as a moral reference point for future Americans. Anti-war activist Henry Hampton tells:

> Heroism is one of the anchors that humans climb up on and we shouldn't lose it as a concept. I don't want to give up on heroes. They're not just people like King, they're people who did something with their own lives to somehow change them… We need a redefinition of heroism, not its elimination. The experience of the war has led the veterans to question the

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[64] Rogovin.

> traditional version of heroism. They have provided us with a different view of heroism which they have extracted from their experience in the war.[65]

Veterans' hoped that their participation in post-war America would ensure that their children felt there is honor in military duty unless such service violates a higher, universal code of righteousness. John Grady summarized his hopes for what can be derived from the experiences of Vietnam veterans:

> Perhaps the challenge after Vietnam is to teach you children that there is reason to be active in the world, that there is public purpose, that we need to define national interests and that there are important needs to be addressed... We can only do this if we value that we are alive and have a chance to do something positive in the world. We need to kindle a sense of broad and warm social responsibility that Vietnam dampened both nationally and internationally. We need to go on.[66]

Although the Vietnam War is generally considered one of the great tragedies of modern American history, the voices of Vietnam veterans provided an opportunity for the American people to reflect on the components of national character and values.

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[65] Rogovin.
[66] Rogovin.

# FAMILIES

> But what the United States and what our Vietnam veterans did not know was that they carried home a tremendous legacy with them. They did not know that genetically on those battlefields were their children. So Agent Orange is now reaping an additional harvest of birth defects and cancers in our children and the men.[67]
>
> *-Maureen Ryan, Veteran's wife & mother of a child born with severe birth defects*

Maureen Ryan was on a crusade to raise awareness of the innocent victims of Agent Orange during the height of the Compensation movement. When her daughter Kerry was born, physicians counted a total of eighteen birth defects that included "twisted intestines, a hole in her heart, a deformed bladder and throat, missing bones, and deformed limbs."[68] Maureen's husband, Mike, believes he was exposed to Agent Orange through contaminated drinking water while in the army. Mrs. Ryan became the unofficial spokeswoman for concerned wives of veterans who felt their children's defects were a result of genetic damage to their husband's sperm. Maureen Ryan demanded that the government provide for the care of the children of Agent Orange victims. The symbolic significance of Ryan and other mother's accusations that chemical manufacturers and the US government were liable for children with severe medical problems was considerable. Even the most remote possibility that Vietnam had ruined the futures of subsequent generations of Americans, churned public feelings of anger and sympathy. Vietnam veteran families like the Ryans composed an outspoken element of the Movement that were bonded by a consensual feeling that if the legacy of Agent

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[67] Wilcox, 55.
[68] Klein, 159.

Orange and Vietnam passed onto their children, then the government and chemical companies must accept culpability.

Following the War, spouses and parents of veterans exposed to Agent Orange contended that the chemical was responsible for health ailments and personal turmoil in their families. Illness challenged families financially and emotionally. The effects of Agent Orange politicized individuals that might not have otherwise been active in veterans' causes. Their participation meant that Americans who might have trouble identifying with veterans' plight, sympathized with their wives and mothers that told of their misery because of Agent Orange. Images of severely disabled children such as Kerry Ryan seated in a wheelchair next to her mother speaking passionately about the injustice of her child's condition and the VA's refusal to provide for her daughter touched a larger audience. Maureen Ryan and others close to veterans exposed to Agent Orange wanted answers to their questions of culpability for their suffering. The voices of innocent victims who had never set foot in Vietnam expanded the scope of the Compensation movement. They raised fears that the legacy of the suffering associated with Vietnam would not end with veterans.

Empirically, the data seemed to suggest to researchers that there was an unusually high correlation of men who had served in the same units that had been exposed to Agent Orange and birth defects in their children. Before this claim could be properly studied through extensive epidemiological research, the media and activist groups assumed Agent Orange was responsible. In the eyes of Americans supporting veterans' causes the VA appeared heartless and cruel by steadfastly maintaining that it would not provide compensatory benefits for veterans' children born with defects. Cleland insisted that the

VA was legally bound to wait until enough data was collected to decide on a just and appropriate course of action. Throughout the early 1980s, the peak years of the Movement, neither the VA nor veterans' groups had adequate data that could affirm or dismiss the teratogenicity of Agent Orange.

Victor Yannacone, chief counsel on behalf of the veterans named as the plaintiffs in the class action lawsuit, played an active role in pushing the connection between Agent Orange and birth defects into the national spotlight. In efforts to boost public support for the veterans involved in the Agent Orange litigation, Yannacone speculated that veterans exposed to Agent Orange were at greater risk to have tragically malformed children. Yannacone enlisted public empathy as a means of placing pressure on the chemical manufacturers to reach settlement outside of court. Yannacone might have known that the emotional testimony of mothers of children borne with severe birth defects would sway most juries regardless of the data scientists presented countering such claims. Legal historian Peter H. Schuck writes that after hearing from Michael Ryan (Kerry's father), Yannacone realized he "had the articulate, photogenic, all-American parents and the lovable but tragically damaged child that he needed as lead plaintiffs in the case."[69] Yannacone used families like the Ryans as a very effective legal tactic to push chemical companies to settle. His actions may have also perpetuated an unfounded myth to veterans' families of children with birth defects that Agent Orange was responsible for their child's misery.

Tom Daschle's crusade centered on how much evidence would be considered sufficient to begin compensating families. Daschle and others held that families did not have the time to wait for the completion of studies that could determine whether Agent

Orange exposure caused extensive sperm damage which led to developmental problems in the embryo. For many fathers and mothers of suffering children, all the evidence they required to determine whether there was linkage was to look at their child's condition.

Current research results do not concretely suggest or dismiss linkage between Agent Orange and birth defects. The Committee to Review the Health Effects in Vietnam Veterans of Exposure to Herbicides, a branch of the Institute of Medicine examined several extensive studies on health maladies assumed to be caused by Agent Orange and birth defects in 1994. The Committee points out that "major birth defects are seen in 2 to 3 percent of live births" and "given the general frequency of major birth defects of 2 to 3 percent and the number of men who served in Vietnam (2.6 million), and by assuming they had at least one child, it has been estimated that 52,000 to 78,000 babies with birth defects have been fathered by Vietnam veterans, even in the absence of an increase due to exposure due to herbicides or other toxic substances."[70] The Committee also found it relevant to note that the cause of most birth defects has not yet been determined. The Committee writes that "approximately 60 percent of all birth defects in humans have no known cause."[71] Other contemporary studies agree with the Committee's conclusion that there is "inadequate or insufficient evidence to determine whether an association exists between exposure to herbicides and birth defects among offspring."[72] The government and veterans' rights groups have both struggled to develop an "exposure index" that could quantify the amount of Agent Orange afflicted veterans were exposed to during their service. Without an exposure index, researchers have had

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[69] Schuck, 48.
[70] Institute of Medicine, 606.
[71] Institute of Medicine, 606.
[72] Institute of Medicine, 606.

difficulty determining which ailments/ diseases are linked to Agent Orange. The VA and veterans differ over the amount of herbicide troops came in contact with during the War. Veterans assert that the HERBS tapes that recorded every spraying mission significantly underestimate their probable exposure. Ground troops report they were often given autonomy to carry out missions in regions by high ranking officials not reflected in battle reports that also were sprayed by Ranch Hand aircraft. It is impossible to link or dismiss Agent Orange's role in birth defects in the absence of knowing how much Agent Orange each soldier was exposed to, and how much presents legitimate risk to veterans' sperm and their health.

Wives and countless other family members such as Maureen Ryan heard first-hand of the tragic events their sons and husbands endured during the Vietnam War. For families of veterans who had a difficult time reintegrating themselves back into society, they were angered by the possibility that their children would also be caught in the misery of the Vietnam War. To these individuals, the symbolic significance of the legacy of the Vietnam War being passed on to their children was not lost. Frank McCarthy details in his testimony: "If they don't look at our children, everything else is not important. That's our future. That's the future of this country. And we don't know yet if the next generation, or the next generation, is going to be affected because our children aren't of childbearing age yet."[73] America's involvement in Vietnam had victimized at least two generations of their family. Mothers like Maureen Ryan felt that not only had their husbands been drafted for service in Vietnam, but so had their children. The Vietnam War would continue to live on in the lives of these families through their

[73]Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 58.

children's suffering. These families were searching for more than just medical and financial compensation. Mrs. Ryan explains her feelings to a committee of US senators:

> The echo of pain you are hearing in this room may come off as a tremendous amount of bitterness. I don't know whether bitterness is the right word so much as it is the level of frustration that has been reached. I think these people have lived private hells, and I don't think we would be sitting here today if we didn't believe in this country. What we are saying though, is that the government is the people and the government has to stand behind us.[74]

Through the filter of the AO controversy, one can better understand how some families of afflicted veterans perceived the outcome of the Vietnam War and the impact it had on their lives. Activists' struggle for compensatory benefits for children born with birth defects can also be seen as a symbolic battle against a government that they felt had abused the trust of its people. Outspoken family members reasoned that if the government could be forced to admit that Agent Orange was responsible for their suffering husbands and children, then possibly it would have also admitted that American intervention was a debacle. Like activist veterans, the families' involvement in the Movement employed strongly anti-war rhetoric. They pointed to their sick families as examples for America about the consequences of war. In the early 1980s, at the height of the Movement, the wives and mothers of afflicted veterans would likely have endured at least three, if not four major wars during their lifetime. Their actions should be seen as an outpouring of grief and anger that their children and grandchildren were denied an opportunity to enjoy a future without war. The director of Vietnam-Era Veterans Inc., Catherine Litchfield affirms:

> My son died in Vietnam. It seems most of my life has been spent with war veterans, beginning with World War I with my uncles, World War II with my brothers, my uncles, friends, my husband. Korea repeated itself.

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[74] Wilcox, 55.

> Vietnam culminated in the death of my son... I hear and I know the stories of the Vietnam veterans... I would like to have President Reagan address me and all of the mothers whose sons died in Vietnam, all of the parents of the young men who are dying today. Because I survived my son's death in Vietnam, I cannot survive the death of my thousands of sons since then.[75]

Litchfield will not tolerate a government and a nation that does not recognize that the country is responsible to care for all those who have been touched by war. She and others imply that if the nation accepts that no one is responsible for veterans and their families suffering from Agent Orange, then they will be sustaining a very dangerous line of reasoning. She argues that believing that wars "just happen," influenced by the forces of history rather than by the decisions made by democratically elected officials, means America will set a trend of not holding future leaders accountable for wars and suffering. America, she believes, must recognize that there are unforeseen consequences of war, such as the children of veterans exposed to Agent Orange. For family members that could identify with Catherine Litchfield, their crusade focused on having the government and country concede that they were all responsible for veterans' needs. This care would also have to be extended to their families. As long as America continued to fight wars, her compatriots would have to accept the unavoidable responsibilities associated with those choices.

Suzanne Hopkins shared Catherine Litchfield's concern that the system that failed to meet the needs of her husband must be reconfigured to cater to the needs of veterans. On May 17, 1981, her husband Jim committed suicide. Jim was a combat veteran who had served in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968. Suzanne related that even after his return to

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[75] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 58-9.

America, Jim's "mind never left the bush."[76] Prior to his suicide, Jim Hopkins had made national headlines by driving his 1946 Willys Jeep through the glass paneling of the entrance to Wadsworth Medical Center, a new VA hospital. While being placed under arrest Jim made remarks that Agent Orange had ruined his life. His arrest inspired Agent Orange activists to stage a hunger strike on the lawn of Wadsworth. A group of protesters did not eat for over fifty days. In response to the strike, Congressman Daschle arranged an emergency meeting to address their concerns.

Suzanne Hopkins believed that the system designed to serve veterans had not only failed Jim, but had defeated him. She maintained that veterans such as Jim should be accommodated and not challenged to survive in a care system. Mrs. Hopkins wondered how America could not feel shame or embarrassment by having struggling Vietnam veterans remain on the fringes of society. Jim's death, Suzanne articulated, was indicative of a flawed system and national attitude that patronized instead of empathizing with veterans. Expressing her frustration, she speaks:

> Why does a Vietnam veteran, who was so desperately in need of help, have to defend himself against the institution set up to help? Why do our Vietnam veterans have to defend themselves? Why are they having to fight for what is due them?[77]

Mrs. Hopkins asserted failure should not be acceptable. She and other family members of veterans wondered aloud why America lacked compassion for Vietnam veterans. She claimed this unfortunate fact was never more apparent than with the numerous obstacles placed in front of veterans seeking treatment for maladies linked to Agent Orange. The Compensation movement provided Suzanne Hopkins a stage to express that tragedies experienced by families like hers' were avoidable if Americans would tackle veterans'

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[76] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 56.

problems with compassion. Suzanne lamented that "it is too late for James Hopkins now, the Vietnam veteran who screamed so loud he became a prisoner and then the victim of the very institution set up to help him."[78]

Suzanne Hopkins, Maureen Ryan and Catherine Litchfield are representative of the wives, mothers and other family members that sought to raise awareness of the legacy of Vietnam and Agent Orange on their loved ones. Through the lens of the Compensation movement, families of veterans implored of America to realize that the battle scars from the Vietnam War were not limited to their husbands, brothers and sons. Agent Orange and the Vietnam experience, they claimed, continued to victimize their families. They felt Americans were obligated to do everything in their power to adequately address veterans' needs. Some wished to use their families as sort of living textbooks of the reality of war. Years had passed since their veterans had left Vietnam, yet the misery caused by the conflict and deadly defoliant continued to haunt their present. They appealed to the nation to ensure that it would not follow them into their future. They felt every citizen was responsible to adequately care for all veterans and their families wounded by the Vietnam experience.

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[77] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 52.
[78] Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues, 54.

## A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE: MIKE RHODE'S SAGA

> Every Vietnam veteran has his own unique story.[79]
>
> *-John Avalos, Vietnam Veteran*

> One time back in 1959, when I was a freshman in high school I asked my Dad, an Air Force intelligence officer almost his entire career, 'Dad what's going on in the world? What do we have to be concerned with these days?' He replied: 'Indo-China....' Low and behold... before we knew it we were at war. I knew I'd be going someday. I knew it was a calling of being an American, that part of your responsibility of being an American was willing to fight for your country too. I really believed in the Domino Theory in those days... that Communism was going to move down and when they finished with Vietnam they would move to the next place. I really believed it was going to be a threat to the economy and the existence of the world, although I didn't really understand all that stuff, I just thought that it was happening.[80]

Not all veterans victimized by Agent Orange participated in the Movement. Contrasting the opinions of outspoken activists, individuals such as Mike Rhode are representative of a large segment of the veteran population effected by Agent Orange who did not ask their countrymen questions concerning larger meanings of the Vietnam War. Like activists vets, though, Rhode's experiences with Agent Orange meant that the legacy of his service in Vietnam would not fade easily from his memory. Rather, his illness meant that the battles he fought in Vietnam would also remain an integral part of his daily existence.

His relaxed manner and reassuring smile quickly dispel any thoughts of him as a bitter, angry veteran who begrudges anyone for his sufferings. Thirty years has gone by since he left his Green Beret Special Forces base in South Vietnam near Tay Ninh, where

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[79] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Issues Concerning Vietnam Veterans, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 16 July 1981, 24.

he intercepted both men and supplies coming off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. From a base in virtual isolation during his tour of duty from 1967 to 1968, Rhode and twelve other American advisors led a force of South Vietnamese soldiers and Cambodian mercenaries. He is proud to have had the opportunity to serve America. He feels neither remorse nor shame for his duty in Vietnam, and has accepted its influence in shaping who he is today. Mike Rhode considers himself lucky as he enters his early fifties.

While a young man, Rhode grew up as a military dependent on bases around the world. He can vividly recall the images of post-WWII Italy, nearly completely reduced to rubble. His childhood and adolescence were marked with the challenges of Stalinist Russia, McCarthyism, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Red China, and the ambiguous conclusion to the Korean War. Rhode thought it inconceivable that his country would not ask him at one point or another to fight against the very real threat Communism posed to the American way of life. He had been preparing for military service his entire life. Rhode maintained a satisfactory college grade point average just to keep his eligibility for competitive swimming and baseball rather than as a means of obtaining a student draft deferment. Rhode believed in America and trusted his actions were obligatory for any young man who loved his country and the freedom he enjoyed.

Today, buried within him are the memories of the Vietnam War. Rhode readily concedes that much of his innocence of youth was lost sometime during his stay in Vietnam. He politely declines to relive several of his experiences as a combat soldier with downward glances towards the floor. Even his wife of several years rarely hears about his days as a sergeant and radio operator. He is not prone to self-pity. Rhode is too interested in living in the present to remain muddled in a past that has been directly

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[80] Mike Rhode, interview by author, tape recording, Vida, OR., 23 January 1999.

intertwined with American intervention in Vietnam. A career in the military did not appeal to him and he had thought that his experience in Vietnam had ended and should be left exactly where it began… in Vietnam.

The only hint of resentment that can be found in Rhode's voice surfaces when he speaks about the way veterans were received upon their return to America. Veterans, Rhode claims, undeservedly were labeled with stereotypes that may have accurately portrayed only a minority of the returnees as suffering from Posttraumatic Stress Disorders or others having extreme difficulties reintegrating themselves back into the mainstream.

> You walked into civilian life alone and were told that you were a loser and were never going anywhere in life. When you would go in for job interviews and they found out that you were a Vietnam vet… they pushed you aside, because they didn't trust you.[81]

In 1975, Rhode asserts, America wanted little to do with returning Vietnam veterans.

From the moment he returned Stateside in 1968 until November 1984, at thirty-nine years old, Rhode had left the war behind him. It was during back surgery in 1984 that Vietnam unexpectedly returned to Mike Rhode.

> I noticed a bruise on my leg that hadn't been there. Well, I thought, I played a lot of softball, I thought I must have kicked myself. It didn't go away. In July I went to a dermatologist and the biopsy results showed that I had non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma with a life expectancy of three to six months. I had a family to raise; my oldest was eleven yeas old. That's the only time I have ever been scared.[82]

Rhode's cancer was aggressive and a short-lived remission proved only to be a respite for when it returned in a more aggressive form. Rhode's health quickly eroded and oncologists, family and friends feared that Rhode would not survive.

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[81] Mike Rhode.
[82] Mike Rhode.

Attributing his remarkable cure from non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma to a religious miracle, Rhode has been in complete remission since July 1984. His own research has led him to believe that his cancer was a consequence of exposure to dioxin. Rhode's feelings towards veterans are mixed; angry at those he felt were using the war as a means of avoiding honest work and responsibilities, while empathizing with those truly without the emotional tools and support network to cope with the war who were in desperate need of help.

> I've been tested for the Posttraumatic Stress Disorders and I've been told I'm in denial. I don't think I'm affected by it... doesn't affect my livelihood and my way of life. I don't think it is a crutch for me either. A lot of guys use it as a crutch. I think a lot of people use it as a crutch and as a way of not accepting responsibility and facing life. But I also think there are a lot of guys that are affected by it. The major difference is that they were young when they were going through that stuff... 18, 19 20 years old and they didn't know what to expect. When they came back from Vietnam, they were immediately thrown into a world where people hated them.[83]

The class action settlement will one day pay Rhode's heirs $12,000. The VA has reimbursed him nearly $30,000 for the medical costs he incurred while undergoing cancer treatment. His frustration has been directed at the chemical manufacturers. By the same token, he has had trouble identifying with the fiery rhetoric of the vocal Vietnam veterans who sought justice in their efforts during the Compensation movement. Like other veterans, his dealings with the VA have left him feeling frustrated and antagonized. He does not believe that there was a conspiracy by the agency to deny veterans their service-connected benefits.

He admits that he is currently receiving ten-percent disability for injuries sustained during active duty. Rhode broke a finger playing catch with a football while on

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[83] Mike Rhode.

leave in Hawaii. Until January 1999, the former Green Beret had made no efforts to contact any of his friends from Vietnam. Recently, he has tried contacting friends he has not heard from for thirty years. Vietnam has played an integral role in Mike Rhode's life and he suspects that some of his son's health ailments (allergies) can be attributed to Agent Orange. He is not alone in worrying that the herbicide that had "felt like oil throughout your whole body"[84] in the jungles of southern Vietnam have not only been the cause of his sickness, but of his son's too.

Questions of culpability for an injured past and an uncertain future connected with Vietnam and Agent Orange don't seem to consume his present. Unlike activist veterans, Rhode has not used the Agent Orange controversy as a mechanism for debating culpability for the emotional, physical and spiritual suffering that have been the lasting consequences of the Vietnam War on many veterans and their families.

The legacy of America's experience in Vietnam has influenced American politics and culture. The Vietnam War left no American untouched and America has not been the same since. Lingering feelings of anger related to the Vietnam War occasionally arise in a congressional debate, political campaign, or even at a neighborhood barbecue. The discussions, though, may soon fade into historical obscurity. The generation of young Americans who staged protests, burned draft cards, and crawled through paddies in the name of freedom are now past middle age.

Many veterans were not as ambivalent as Rhode, when, upon their return to America and mysterious illnesses began to plague them. Transcripts of Congressional hearings convened to discuss Agent Orange tell that when veterans found evidence that Agent Orange was the cause, they sounded a rallying cry. The Agent Orange

[84] Mike Rhode.

Compensation Movement signified the height of the Vietnam veterans' rights campaigns of the late 1970s to the early 1980s. Although Mike Rhode and veterans like him did not participate in the Movement, they too, were forced to deal with the continuing reality of the Vietnam War every day. Had these veterans not been confronted with the challenges of Agent Orange related illnesses, it is unknown whether they would have extensively reflected on the meaning of their Vietnam experience.

# THE LEGACY

The veteran activism borne of the AO Compensation movement has lessened considerably since the class action lawsuit was settled out of court. Congressional hearings have met on a regular basis to review new information on the health effects of Agent Orange on veterans. At present the Bureau of Veterans' Affairs recognizes and compensates Vietnam Veterans for the following dioxin exposure related conditions: chloracne, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, soft tissue sarcoma, Hodgkin's disease, porphyria cutanea tarda, multiple myeloma, respiratory cancers (including cancers of the lung, larynx, and bronchus), prostate cancer, peripheral neuropathy (acute or subacute). The children of veterans afflicted with spina biffida are also currently provided medical/ financial benefits. Veterans have accused US Air Force researchers of both inaccuracies and blatant lies in their extensive study of the health of Ranch Hand personnel. Their accusations have been supported by recent discoveries. Echoes of the past returned in 1992 when veterans of the Persian Gulf War complained of undiagnosed health ailments reminiscent of those of Vietnam veterans. Gulf War veterans assert that Iraqi forces used chemical weapons during the conflict that have caused numerous maladies in veterans. The US government believes such claims are unfounded. Like Vietnam veterans, sick Gulf War veterans accuse the government of a cover-up and conspiracy.

It is impossible to identify a singular reason for the end of Vietnam veteran and Agent Orange activism. The three-pillar alliance of the movement, Frank McCarthy as head of Agent Orange Victims' International, Victor Yannacone, and the Ryan family

splintered over disagreements of the settlement plan. Peter H. Schuck analyzes that Michael Ryan envisioned himself "as a crusader not so much on behalf of the veterans as against what he sees as the growing chemical contamination of the world."[85] Ryan's philosophical differences with McCarthy for involving his family in the Compensation movement are evident in his description of the outspoken leader. Ryan summarizes:

> Frank was the kind of veteran who refers to Vietnam as 'Nam, who cannot stop living the war. He wanted desperately to build a veterans' organization around that nightmare. He was always looking back to Vietnam, saying 'We got fucked over in 'Nam and now it's happening again here.'"[86]

Internal squabbles emerged over how the settlement funds should be handled. To a larger, more intangible extent, the powerful emotions which had fueled the movement had been somewhat pacified in the wake of the settlement.

The controversy surrounding Agent Orange and suffering caused by US involvement in Vietnam might never be resolved. Some contemporary historians believe that Americans did not learn any "real lessons" from the Vietnam War. In the Agent Orange Compensation movement veterans were often asking for the government, chemical companies, and the American people to accept culpability for their suffering. Some were searching for a sense of personal meaning from the horrors of war. There may be no tangible way of compensating these veterans for the kinds of losses and pain Agent Orange and the Vietnam experience caused them. Author Frances Fitzgerald asserts that the real legacy of the Vietnam War on America will be determined by the willingness to confront the realities of the past and their influences on the present. She writes:

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[85] Schuck, 48.
[86] Schuck, 48.

> ...The past is not simply for historians. Strength and endurance come from having a connection with one's history. The past and future are balanced in the present, and you have one only to the extent that you have the other...You can have control over you future only to the extent that you have the other.[87]

The Agent Orange Compensation movement provides a historical medium to better understand the experiences of Vietnam veterans and their families. Textbooks may give cursory mention of battles, casualties and significant events and leaders, yet they do not delve into the intangible. The human impact of the Vietnam War surfaced in the Agent Orange debate from 1978 to 1984. The emotional expense of the Vietnam War on the lives of veterans is impossible to quantify. Agent Orange teaches that mistakes of the past cannot be undone, but there are ways of controlling their legacy. The underlying message of the Movement may be that until the legacy of Agent Orange and Vietnam are adequately addressed, they will continue to create misery and discord in the lives of many.

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[87] Frances Fitzgerald, "How Does America Avoid Future Vietnams?" in Vietnam Reconsidered, ed. Harrison E. Salisbury (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 305.

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