

# The Providence Sunday Journal

## Big questions in Agent Orange cleanup

ANDREW G. REITER

**T**he recent announcement by the U.S. that it will begin working with the Vietnamese government in an effort to clean up soil poisoned by the use of Agent Orange was welcomed by many as an important step in healing the wounds of the Vietnam War. Yet the move raises serious questions about how the U.S. will deal with other legacies of the Vietnam War, including issues with its own veterans, and what this means for damage done by the U.S. military in dozens of other countries during past and present wars.

In a war, like most, known for atrocities, the use of the chemical compound Agent Orange, known as dioxin, was one of the most infamous. It was mostly made by Monsanto and Dow Chemical. From the 1960s through the mid-'70s, the U.S. sprayed over 14 million gallons of the toxic chemical in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos to try to defoliate areas and deprive guerrillas of cover. Since then, Agent Orange has been identified as one of the most toxic compounds ever made by humans, and the Red Cross estimates that as many as a million people in Viet-

nam today suffer from disabilities and other health effects related to its use. Soil and water supplies across much of Southeast Asia remain contaminated.

Now, after decades of denial, the U.S. is finally owning up to its actions and helping to repair the damage. This move, on its surface, should be praised. Yet the timing and scope of the project raise serious questions about the sincerity of U.S. efforts.

The joint project aims to clean up just over 70 acres of soil around the airport in the central Vietnamese city of Danang. Nothing has been said or promised regarding the thousands of acres around the country that need similar cleanups, or the cost of care for those individuals already sickened by contaminated water and soil. Furthermore, the timing of the announcement, coming on the heels of U.S. efforts to strengthen ties with countries surrounding a rising China, raise additional concerns that this may be more of a symbolic gesture intended to secure a key ally than a legitimate effort to address the past.

Moreover, U.S. veterans of the Vietnam War, more than 2.6 million of whom were exposed to the chemical, will also take notice of this new project, which will cost more than \$40 million

over four years. Veterans still battle an exasperating bureaucracy and face long delays in receiving compensation for their illnesses, and remain upset by the failure of the U.S. government to conduct a full study into the health effects of defoliants used in the war.

This is a risky move for a country that has been engaged in so many conflicts abroad over the past half century. Neighboring countries, faced with their own similar cleanup operations, can now cite this as an example of U.S. responsibility and also demand aid. And this was not the only or last place that the U.S. used deadly weapons with potential health effects. Recent accusations suggest that the use of white-phosphorous munitions in the Iraq War may be responsible for abnormally high rates of birth defects in the city of Fallujah.

At the ceremony to begin the cleanup project, U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam David Shear said that the two countries were moving to "bury the legacies of our past," but in the long run the U.S. will probably find that this unearths more issues than it buries.

Andrew G. Reiter is an assistant professor of politics and international relations at Mount Holyoke College, in South Hadley, Mass.