



Comments on Panel 47

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PANEL 47: *Foreign Policy, the Vietnam War, and the Environment: Chemical Defoliation Across Decades and Borders*

Chair: **Richard P. Tucker**, University of Michigan

“The Wild West and the New Frontier: The Kennedy Administration, Vietnam, and Operation Ranch Hand” by **Evelyn Krache Morris**, Georgetown University¹

“Agent Orange & Vietnam” by **Edwin A. Martini**, Western Michigan University

“Putting the Present Behind Us: Détente, Disarmament and Environmental Warfare in Vietnam” by **David Zierler**, Temple University

Commentator: **Andrew Jon Rotter**, Colgate University

All of these are smart and provocative papers, considering a subject that, as Martini says, is “one of the most recognizable yet least understood aspects of the Second Indochina War.” It is indeed surprising that relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to Agent Orange and its sibling poisons: there is William Buckingham’s study, published by the Air Force Office of History, Fred Wilcox’s 1989 expose *Waiting for an Army to Die*, and Peter Schuck’s account of the trial that put herbicides into the public consciousness, at least for awhile; but there is little else. These papers are thus especially welcome, and I look forward, as all of us should, to their expansion and refinement as dissertations, articles, or books.

Insofar as the story of Vietnam War herbicides is known in this country, it has to do most with the effect of dioxin on the American soldiers who sprayed it on the jungles or were inadvertently caught out in a sprayed area. Returned soldiers reported cases of chloracne, nausea, dizziness, fatigue, loss of appetite for food and sex, and a variety of other troubling symptoms. The Veterans’ Administration was at first skeptical; the companies that produced the chemicals insisted that they could not have damaged human beings in these ways. Ultimately, there was some grudging, high-level recognition that the toxic compounds in the herbicides might have done harm, and Americans thought to have been exposed received medical and psychological help. But we know less about the thinking that prompted American policymakers to use these agents, little about the impact of herbicide use on Vietnam strategy more generally, and almost nothing about the effects of the spraying on the Vietnamese who endured it. (The anthropologist Diane Fox and peace activists like Mike Boehm have at least bothered to interview Vietnamese

¹ A copy of this paper is available on the H-Diplo SHAFR 2007 Conference Reports & Papers website, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reports/#SHAFR2007> .

about their lives during the war.) The three papers also offer insight into these and other matters.

Evelyn Morris's paper is in part an exercise in cultural and intellectual history. She argues that 19th century American ideas about the western frontier—that the land was empty and thus there for the taking, that the means of its taking would involve a grid imposed on its topography, and that the land was to be tamed—were wrongly transposed to the “New Frontier”: Vietnam, during the Kennedy presidency. What might have worked in the American West had no chance in Vietnam. Herbicides couldn't empty the land of foliage, for the jungle was too thick and otherwise impervious to killing with chemicals. Grids, which are artificial boundaries, could not contain the herbicides (indeed, even their own barrels could not). And there was no taming a landscape when the poisonous means of doing so alienated the people whose cooperation was essential to the subjugation of their environment, or at least the so-called pests who inhabited it.

These are fascinating and provocative points. And yet, I wonder if the comparisons she uses might be adjusted slightly. Those parts of the 19th century American West that were inhabited, not empty, were no more instantly susceptible to griddling and taming than was Vietnam in 1962, as the Indian wars suggest. The apparent lesson of the Jacksonian period and after was that incorporation of Indians wouldn't work. Whites relocated the native population, making refugees of its members or confining them to fixed and sterile places supposedly for their own protection—reservations in the American West, strategic hamlets in Vietnam. There were no chemical herbicides to use against the Cherokee, the Apache, or the Sioux, but one might sell them liquor or blankets infested with smallpox, and one might deny them shelter or food unless they proved cooperative. In other words, if the land wasn't empty, you empty it. Morris notes the American characterization of guerrillas in Vietnam as “prowling...slithering...otters.” She might also have pointed out that William Westmoreland's preferred term for the Viet Cong was “red termites,” a borrowing from the French. Termites aren't easy to kill, but the way to do it is to spray them with something toxic. And such an idea would have made superficial, brutish sense to Americans less in touch with the history of their western frontier than with their own struggles, during the 1950s and 1960s, with pests who threatened their ranch-style homesteads on the crabgrass frontier of the suburbs. I don't have statistics from the early 1960s, but Americans in suburbs currently spend more per acre on pesticides and herbicides than farmers do. The logic of herbicide use in Vietnam may have evolved less from some deep memory of taming the West than from weekend wars against lawn grubs fought by men who made policy at the Pentagon, Foggy Bottom, and the White House. There was also a perverse, neo-Darwinian logic to herbicides that would have appealed to the corporate-minded: dioxin killed off only the weakest plants. The strong survived and flourished.

In “More Dangerous Than Bullets,” **Ed Martini** suggests that Agent Orange “has agency.” To demonstrate this, he examines transcripts of interviews done mostly by Vietnamese employees of the Rand Corporation with captured or defecting soldiers of the NLF. This

is a form of social history. His reading reveals some surprises: that Vietnamese subject to spraying feared it, but generally adapted to it by adjusting their harvesting and consumption habits; that NLF cadres ran the risk of overselling the danger of herbicides and of attracting by their presence in villages the unwanted attention of American sprayer planes; and that health problems associated with the spray, reported abundantly in the this country when soldiers returned from the war, were mostly unobserved by the interview subjects. The Vietnamese nevertheless rated the threat from herbicides more dangerous than bombing: it was, they said, harder to escape and had potential long-term effects that bombs did not. These are tantalizing conclusions that Martini promises to supplement with more material, including that from “communities around the world,” and I look forward to reading the finished project.

I hope Martini’s research will include visiting Vietnam and talking to people there. For his 1974 film “Hearts and Minds,” Peter Davis interviewed a Vietnamese man who built coffins, including some for young children. When he was asked why he needed so many, and why in particular children were dying, he replied, “poison”; the image then shifted to a plane dispensing a yellowish cloud. I am not sure exactly what Martini means when he says that the herbicides “had agency,” unless he means simply that they were toxic. In some sense, I suppose, any weapon has agency if it’s powerful enough. But all weapons, including Agent Orange, need to be used by human beings, who really do have agency and thus ultimate responsibility for their deployment. That the responses to questions Martini analyzes do not yield clear and uniform conclusions is not surprising. With more material, and a broader context for his sources, Martini should produce a study of great interest and consequence.

David Zierler’s paper takes a more traditional approach to the subject of “environmental warfare”—this is more like political history—but it is no less valuable for that. He has found a little-studied initiative of the Nixon Administration: a desire to put the United States out front on the issue of disarmament, to include reductions or prohibitions placed on chemical and biological weapons. Historians have long claimed that Nixon and Henry Kissinger had decided to be content with nuclear sufficiency vis a vis the Soviet Union as a way of moving toward détente. Zierler alerts us here to the presence of non-nuclear weapons in their plan. Unhappily for the president, his very mention of the chemical weapons issue made an opening for critics of the ongoing war, both scientists and legislators, to object to the past and present (if dwindling) use of herbicides by the United States in Vietnam. Signing the Geneva Protocol of 1925 to prohibit the use of chemical weapons was fine, the White House concluded, as long as it did not mean having to say it was sorry for past uses, and as long as it was allowed to continue to use “riot-control agents and chemical herbicides.” The Foreign Relations Committee wasn’t having that, and there matters stalled until after Nixon’s resignation.

Zierler’s case is well documented, and it is good to see him take Congress seriously as a source of policy formation; historians of the Vietnam War have not always done that. Like many well documented studies, especially those in their early stages, Zierler’s is a bit

too close to his sources—he has perhaps inadvertently taken on Operation Ranch Hand’s morbid motto, “Only You Can Prevent Forests,” and lost his for the evidentiary trees. What Nixon and Kissinger think of Congress’s position on their proposal is hard to fathom, as neither man is quoted: we hear only of initiatives taken by the “Nixon administration.” Little is made of the seemingly important fact that Nixon ordered the use of herbicides stopped in Vietnam. Why did he do this? And, while Zierler rightly notes the emergence of the ecology movement in the United States and the celebration of the first Earth Day in 1970, he doesn’t tell us whether he thinks the administration saw this a political force to be reckoned with and, if so, whether this perception might have contributed to its decision-making on the Geneva Protocol. In fairness, these and other matters are likely to be taken up in the longer version of Zierler’s study.

Let me conclude with a general point that I hope will prompt a response from the panelists and the audience. I doubt that many historians noted the death, late last month, of William Seske, age 93. Seske was a chemical engineer trained at the University of Wisconsin who enlisted in the military at the onset of World War II. He was sent to the Edgewood Arsenal, a sprawling complex in marshland twenty miles east of Baltimore that had been built during the First World War to manufacture chemical weapons, including phosgene, chlorine, and mustard gas for use in Europe. By early 1942, when Seske arrived, researchers at Edgewood were developing incendiary bombs, looking for ways to get the biggest bang for their buck. Seske helped by finding a way to cluster small incendiaries in order to make a powerful bigger bomb, and the weapon he fashioned was used in the Doolittle raid against Japan in April 1942. Seske transferred to the Chemical Warfare Arsenal, in Pine Bluff (Ark.), established in November 1941. At Pine Bluff they made incendiaries, and chemical agents like mustard, millions of pounds of them. Among the compounds Seske tested at Pine Bluff were DDT and 2, 4-D. The latter induced a kind of cancer in broadleaf plant cells, making them grow so fast that they choked on their own success. It spared grasses. After the war, using what he’d learned at Pine Bluff, Seske went into the dandelion killing business in his home town of Spokane, adding fertilizing and pest control—he helped a local slaughterhouse get rid of an infestation of cockroaches—as his client base expanded. (His company, originally called Chemical Weed and Pest Control but having dropped in 1970 the un-ecological word “Chemical,” is today a \$20 million a year business run by one of his sons.)

I mention William Seske because I am interested in the way in which his work involved weapons we like to place in two different categories: incendiaries and chemical weapons. Workers and scientists at Edgewood and Pine Bluff developed both. During the Vietnam War, protesters focused on the American use of napalm, a weapon made of thickened gasoline, one that we imagine, and depict, killing and wounding people by burning their skin. It killed, in other words, like explosives, from the outside of the body in. Chemical weapons dispensed as gases kill by suffocating people. Gas—like radiation—is insidious in a way that incendiaries are not. It kills from the inside out. A second apparent difference between “conventional” weapons and chemicals is that the first kill or maim instantly, while the second can have latency periods so that symptoms do not appear

until days or weeks after exposure: hence Vietnamese worries, noted by Martini, that the spray that seemed harmless at first might yet affect them.

In truth, the distinctions we make between weapons may be little more than aesthetic. Many of those who were killed by incendiary bombings of German and Japanese cities during World War II were not killed from the outside in but suffocated when the intense heat sucked all the oxygen from their shelters. Many of those who survived attacks by incendiaries or explosives carried lifelong wounds that caused permanent pain or required ongoing treatment. Chemical weapons sometimes leave traces of their presence on the body (one's skin changes color) or in the air (gases during World War I could smell like horseradish or clover). Thus, I am asking the panelists whether we should consider herbicidal warfare as something distinct from other kinds of warfare practiced in Vietnam. Does it occupy a special category of opprobrium? Does it require analysis different from that needed to understand the use of other kinds of weapons? Should we be less interested in how it wounds or kills than in its intended target? International law prohibits the targeting of non-combatants in war. But it allows for mistakes, or exceptions: this is the "double effect" (what the U.S. military calls "collateral damage"), in which civilians are killed, but not because they have been targeted. Instead, they are victims of an attack that is morally acceptable because it targets the enemy directly, or aims at his military supplies, or because the attacker, despite intending only to strike combatants, and using care to do so, only inadvertently hits the innocent. A guerrilla war, naturally, makes more difficult the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. So if the Americans were only trying to reveal the enemy by spraying his forests with Agent Orange, or to deny him food, was the chemical a relatively more humane or proportional weapon than "conventional" bombs dropped from B-52s, or napalm?

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