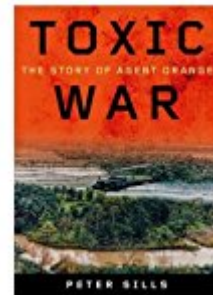




Peter Sills. *Toxic War: The Story of Agent Orange*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014. x + 285 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8265-1962-7.



Reviewed by Robert Thompson (University of Southern Mississippi)

Published on H-War (April, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

The use of the defoliant Agent Orange by the United States is one of the most controversial actions of the Vietnam War. In *Toxic War: The Story of Agent Orange*, Peter Sills provides much-needed clarity to the history of Agent Orange with his use of data made available by legal proceedings. The author discusses the development of defoliants from the end of the Second World War through the Vietnam War. In particular, he focuses on the events preceding the class-action lawsuit against the federal government and manufacturers of the defoliants used in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Sills endeavors to demonstrate that the chemical industry was aware of the dangers posed by defoliants to people. The chemical industry never fully disclosed such knowledge. “Denial reigned supreme. Any evidence (and there was plenty) showing that herbicides were counterproductive and causing enormous, unanticipated harm was simply brushed aside,” writes Sills. Moreover, “the chemical industry and at least a few government scientists knew that these compounds contained a hidden, extraordinary toxic contaminant, and they kept that information secret” (p. 13).

Throughout the book, the author weaves the history of America’s defoliant program with the effects of such an endeavor. In that vein, Sills recounts the chemical

industry’s development of defoliants and their controversial use against crops and vegetation in the RVN. Arranged into twenty-two short chapters, with an introduction and epilogue, *Toxic War* emerged primarily from the documents made available during the discovery phase of the first class-action lawsuit about the product as well as from interviews and files obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. In the foreword, Sills notes that he was “tangentially involved in that litigation” and knew the value of those court documents (p. ix). Indeed, these memos and reports reveal that, from observing their own employees and conducting internal studies, chemical companies knew that their defoliants caused chloracne and a range of other ailments.

*Toxic War* takes readers through the history of the United States’ use of herbicides during the Vietnam War. Sills argues that the president of RVN, Ngo Dinh Diem, pressured his American backers to use defoliants against the Viet Cong. Ultimately, the benefits of such use, notes the author, were marginal as reports praised the psychological effects of the chemicals despite their minimal tactical impact. Nevertheless, “the United States refused to abandon defoliation. The spraying program, like any good bureaucracy, had already developed its own momentum” (p. 57). Programs like Trail Dust and

Ranch Hand gained support and more targets to spray with chemical agents. Benefiting financially from the need for more and more 2,4,5-T (Agent Orange) were American businesses like Dow, Diamond Shamrock, Hercules, Monsanto, Thompson Chemicals, and Thompson-Hayward, as well as the Canadian company Uniroyal. Sills also addresses the effects on workers at the defoliant producing chemical plants. Like the American military personnel exposed to the defoliants, plant workers developed forms of cancer.

Through his research, the author found evidence of American attempts to keep the dangers of Agent Orange confidential. In his deposition, Edgewood Arsenal's Charles Minarik, the "father of Agent Orange," was shown a form he completed to acquire a sample of dioxin for his own work on herbicides (p. 75). For Sills, while Minarik denied ever making such a request, Minarik's request and denial displayed efforts to cover up the weaponization of dioxin. This implies that the federal government actively hid and later denied its research.

The most significant component of *Toxic War* is the author's discussion of the federal government's efforts to determine the existence of a link between defoliants with the long-term illnesses exhibited by Vietnam War veterans. In the first half of the 1980s, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) studied the effects of Agent Orange among veterans of the Vietnam War and their children. The author argues that the CDC's efforts to better understand the harm caused by Agent Orange failed to materialize as politics defeated science. In chapter 19, Sills contends that the CDC struggled to develop a sample pool of afflicted veterans, with Congress's Agent Orange Working Group quietly instructing the CDC to end its

research and inform Veterans Affairs of the impossibility of completing such a study. Yet what Sills demonstrates is that the CDC did a poor job of grasping the data and organizing a proper study rather than showing how politics thwarted research. Indeed, the author states, "CDC leapfrogged from its finding that the blood analyses couldn't validate the military record to the determination that they'd actually proved ground troops weren't exposed. But if a study couldn't be done because the data isn't good enough, how is it possible to come up with conclusive results from that same data?" (p. 198).

In his effort to connect the legal documents with the chemical industry's culpability, the author creates a chaotic narrative. *Toxic War* contains a range of dates not always consistent with chronology. For example, Sills opens chapter 11 with events that occurred in 1966, yet in the subsequent chapter, he addresses events from 1961. Even thematically, poor organization means readers will get lost the further they get into the book as there are lengthy gaps between the discussion of similar subtopics. Longer and better organized chapters would have greatly enhanced the clarity of the author's arguments. Consequently, the organization and structure of the book are the main weakness of *Toxic War*.

Questionable organization and structure aside, Sills provides a thought-provoking and well-researched work. Academics and veterans of the Vietnam War will appreciate *Toxic War* because of the informative history of defoliants in the RVN and the haunting legacy of their use. The primary sources used by the author ensure that *Toxic War* is a significant addition to the historiography of the Vietnam War.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Robert Thompson. Review of Sills, Peter, *Toxic War: The Story of Agent Orange*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2016.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42005>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.