

# US War Crimes: Can Obama Burnish His Legacy by Meeting With Agent Orange Victims in Vietnam?

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*At the end of May, President Obama will visit Vietnam, where he will have an opportunity to burnish his foreign policy legacy. Obama has taken some bold steps in that direction: He engineered a critical agreement with Iran to defuse its nuclear program, and he recently traveled to Cuba and began the process of normalizing relations between the US and Cuba.*

But Obama needs to do more to overcome his hawkish foreign policy legacy. His administration has killed thousands of people — many of them civilians — with drones and manned bombers. The vacuum created by his regime change in Libya destabilized that country and led to the rise of ISIS (also known as Daesh).

With his forthcoming visit to Vietnam, Obama can fortify his legacy by meeting with victims of Agent Orange the United States sprayed on Vietnam during the war.



US Army armored personnel carrier spraying Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. President Obama can fortify his legacy by meeting with victims of Agent Orange the United States sprayed on Vietnam during the war. (Photo: [Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr. Collection](#))

With his forthcoming visit to Vietnam, Obama can fortify his legacy by meeting with victims of Agent Orange the United States sprayed on Vietnam during the war. He can then accurately assess the tragic situation the US created there and take steps to remedy it.

“Four decades after the US left this country in a state of devastation and ruin, the Vietnamese have recovered impressively,” said US Army veteran Chuck Searcy, who served in Vietnam from 1967 to 1968. “They have risen from poverty, rebuilt infrastructure, reformed their economy and created new opportunities for a young, educated generation.” Searcy lives in Vietnam, where he is co-chair of the nongovernmental organization Agent Orange Working Group and cofounder of Project RENEW in Quảng Trị Province.

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Indeed, Vietnam is experiencing impressive successes in development. The United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund ([UNICEF](#)) [reported](#) that Vietnam has eradicated extreme hunger and poverty; has made significant progress in achieving universal primary education; has increased girls’ participation in education at primary and secondary levels; has achieved one of the highest rates of representation of women in decision-making in national parliament in the region; and has drastically reduced infant, maternal and toddler mortality.

But 40 years after the end of the US war in Vietnam, the Vietnamese people still suffer the effects of that war.

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Approximately 5 million Vietnamese and many US and allied soldiers were exposed to the toxic chemical dioxin in [Agent Orange](#). For many of them and their progeny, the suffering continues.

Agent Orange was an herbicidal chemical weapon that was sprayed over 12 percent of Vietnam by the US military from 1961 to 1971. The [dioxin](#) present in Agent Orange is one of the most toxic chemicals known to humankind.

Those exposed to Agent Orange during the war frequently have children and grandchildren born with serious illnesses and disabilities. The international scientific community has identified an association between exposure to Agent Orange and some forms of cancers, reproductive abnormalities, immune and endocrine deficiencies, and nervous system damage. Second- and third-generation victims continue to be born in Vietnam, as well as to US veterans and Vietnamese-Americans in this country.

In 2009, I served as one of seven judges from three continents who heard two days of testimony from 27 witnesses at the International People's Tribunal of Conscience in Support of the Vietnamese Victims of Agent Orange in Paris. The witnesses included victims, their families, journalists, US Vietnam War veterans and scientists. We saw firsthand horribly disfigured individuals who had been exposed to Agent Orange/dioxin during the Vietnam War.

One of the witnesses was Mai Giang Vũ, who came in contact with Agent Orange while serving in the South Vietnamese Army from 1968 to 1974. He carried barrels of chemicals on his back. His sons, born in 1974 and 1975, were unable to walk or function normally. Their limbs gradually "curled up" and they could only crawl. They were bedridden by age 18. One died at age 23, the other at age 25.

The US government has given small amounts of money to address the human victims of Agent Orange/dioxin. Much of the money has not reached the Agent Orange victims who need it so much, and the amounts allocated cannot make much of a dent in addressing the tremendous human suffering.

The United States paid to clean up one of the "hotspots" contaminated with dioxin near the Da Nang Air Base. But there are 28 hotspots in Vietnam still poisoned by dioxin. They continue to affect the people who live there and eat the crops, land animals and fish. All of these hotspots need to be remediated.

In addition, Searcy points out, there are "Vietnamese families living mostly in poverty, in painfully abject circumstances, with two, three, sometimes four or five severely disabled children who now may be grown, in their 20s and 30s, who cannot take care of their own basic needs. They are a 24-hour care burden for aging parents, who need help and support to get through the day and night."

Although there are a number of [Friendship and Peace Villages](#) where victims of Agent

Orange are cared for, many more are needed. Time is running out for many of the second and third generation victims whose parents are passing on, leaving no one to care for them.

Second and third generation children of American Vietnam veterans face the same problems as do exposed Vietnamese-Americans.

That is why Rep. Barbara Lee (D-California) introduced [H.R. 2114](#), the Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act of 2015. The bill, which currently has 22 co-sponsors, would provide health care and social services for affected Vietnamese; medical assistance and disability benefits to affected children of US veterans of the Vietnam War; and health assessment, counseling and treatment for affected Vietnamese-Americans and their offspring. It would also clean up the lands and restore ecosystems contaminated by Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam.

The American Public Health Association [recommended](#) that the US government and the involved chemical companies provide resources for services for those with disabilities in areas where dioxin victims are concentrated, and take responsibility to remediate or attempt to clean up those areas in Vietnam that still contain high levels of dioxin.

Obama's visit, Searcy says, "is a crucial last opportunity for us Americans to face up to our responsibilities to deal with these remaining war legacies — UXO [unexploded ordnance] and Agent Orange — in a way that will allow us to bring some closure to these problems, as Americans, as decent people who finally have done the right thing."

The president and the first lady, if she accompanies him, should make time during their visit to meet with young Agent Orange victims and their representative, the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin. They would also do well to meet with US Vietnam veterans, such as Searcy, who live in Vietnam and have dedicated their lives to helping the victims.

Obama can truly heal the wounds of war and establish a firmer basis of friendship and understanding between the people of Vietnam and the people in the United States. He should seize this opportunity and meet with the victims of Agent Orange/dioxin.

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