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## Occam's Razor Vol. 2 - Full (2012)

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**Occam's Razor**  
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# Occam's Razor

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# OCCAM'S RAZOR

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**A Selection of Western's Finest Scholarship**

**Edited by: Cameron Adams**

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VOLUME 2

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# Forward

DEAR READERS,

Three years ago my frustration at a lack of publishing opportunities for all but a short list of academic majors at Western inspired me to begin the process of creating Occam's Razor. After two years, hundreds of meetings, a few false starts, and some very good advice and support, the first issue was published in May of last year. Now, as the second annual issue takes shape under the capable leadership of Cameron Adams, I'm sitting in a hotel room on the other side of the world, reading and enjoying the student papers that will make up the volume you hold. These papers have been selected for their quality of thought and execution, and revised with a general audience in mind.

Within the following pages you'll find thoughts and insights on a variety of topics, from paranoia as a cultural phenomenon to visits to war-torn regions as a form of dark tourism to the continuing struggle of Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange, and the impacts of Greenwashing. This publication was formed under the suspicion that a great many worthwhile insights were passing under the radar of the campus consciousness and into obscurity for lack of exposure, and in my less-than-scientific opinion the small sample of works contained in this volume serve only to confirm that our suspicions have been well-founded.

In addition to a commitment to the recognition and encouragement of good research and writing at Western, the mission of Occam's Razor includes the continuous quest to develop the potential for productive and mutually beneficial collaboration between the different colleges, departments, clubs, and organizations

across the University. This leads me to the final piece of the puzzle: you, the student who picked this volume up and read it. If you find the vision I have described at all inspiring, Occam's Razor wants to hear from you. It takes fresh talent every single year to keep an outfit like this one alive, and if you see a role for yourself here--whether it be as a contributor, an editor, a manager, a graphic designer, or something we haven't thought of yet--I want to encourage you to take this chance to put your energy and creativity at the service of your school and your community.

Sincerely,

**Chris Crow**

Founder and Former Editor-in-Chief





# Encounters of a Conflict Tourist

## *Concept and a Case Study of Northern Ireland*

**by Kenneth Elvig**

INTERNATIONAL TOURISM IS A BROAD AND DIVERSE INDUSTRY that caters to several kinds of tourists. Traditionally, international tourists travel to “must see” destinations, and go through rituals of tourism such as snapping pictures, touring museums, and buying souvenirs. In recent years, newer forms of tourism have emerged such as ecotourism, community-based tourism, and other “alternative” or non-traditional forms of tourism. One new, but uncommon, form of tourism is based on conflict. Conflict tourism is a form of dark tourism (tourism relating to death, disaster, destruction, etc.) where the tourist travels to current conflict areas or areas where conflict has occurred. In Northern Ireland there has been surge of conflict tourism (locally known as political tourism) following the end of The Troubles. The Troubles, which I will later describe in depth, was a time of politically and religiously motivated violence that happened in the latter half of the 20th century in Northern Ireland. This essay will examine what conflict tourism is, and I will recount my experience with it in Northern Ireland in 2009.

In conflict tourism in Northern Ireland, and all around the globe, there are several reoccurring motives and purposes. The most common theme is a construction of history that tells “the truth.” Other themes include the commoditization of violence, the tourists’ gaze and the local population’s self image. I will also discuss these themes as well as the social, moral, and ethical concerns of conflict tourism, with a particular focus on political tourism in Northern Ireland.

## Conflict Tourism

First off, what exactly is conflict tourism? It is a broadly defined category that overlaps with other kinds of tourism, especially dark tourism (Brouillette 2006: 343). Conflict tourists may visit a country exclusively for conflict tourism or they may include a conflict tour as just one part of a much larger itinerary. The most common form of conflict tourism is historical battlefield tourism. Generally, in historical battlefield tourism, the actual conflict that caused the battle is over. Civil War battlefields in America are a classic example of this form of tourism.

**Conflict tourism is a form of dark tourism (tourism relating to death, disaster, destruction, etc) where the tourist travels to current conflict areas or areas where conflict has occurred.**

While individuals living near these historic battlefields may still identify themselves as “Yankee” or “Rebel,” they no longer kill each other over their disagreements. The distinguishing feature of historical battlefield tourism (all over the world) is that the extreme tensions that caused the historical conflict are almost non-existent today. On the more extreme

end of conflict tourism, tourists can visit current war zones and low intensity conflict areas where actual fighting is still happening. Examples of this could include trips to war torn Afghanistan or Libya, or extremely dangerous and volatile places like the Democratic Republic of Congo or Northern Mexico.

Many conflict tourists, however, choose to travel to slightly “safer” destinations where the major fighting has recently subsided, but tensions still exist. These areas are known as “flashpoints” because conflict could “ignite” there at any moment. Flashpoint tourism can include (as of 2011) countries like Honduras, Angola, South Africa, Israel/Palestine, the former Yugoslavia and the focus of this research, Northern Ireland. In former conflict areas where the belligerents have recently laid down their arms, the locals are still understandably tense and sensitive about what they have endured. They may or may not be able to tolerate the ways which tourists come into their communities and point, take photos, gawk and stare (sometimes called the tourists’ gaze). Considering this, flashpoint tourists often choose to tell customs officials and locals that they are visiting the country for other reasons. In Zimbabwe, the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), is highly sensitive about the political violence and turmoil that has plagued the country. Because of this, when I

traveled to Zimbabwe in August 2010 as a conflict tourist, I told the customs officials there that I was interested in nature tourism at Victoria Falls. As a conflict tourist in Zimbabwe, I had to lie to enter the country, in contrast to other places, such as Northern Ireland, where conflict tourism is actually encouraged.

One of the main concerns of conflict tourism is safety. The level of safety a conflict tourist has is relative to the particular destination, the tourist's country of origin, race, and religion. For the historical battlefield tourist, the greatest danger they may face is mosquitoes and sunburns. On the other end of the spectrum, there is very little or no safety in traveling to an active war zone. This is especially true in areas like Afghanistan where there is still contested ground between the belligerents. In flashpoint tourism, where there is still high tension, there is always the very real danger that hostilities will be reignited. For example, the tense but currently peaceful situation is a concern of border tourists in the Israel/Palestine region. For many years, this area was considered unsafe for tourism. However, progress has been made in terms of border crossing cooperation between Israel and her neighbors, and has thus increased tourism in the area. Despite state on state tensions decreasing, terrorism is still a concern in this region. Many of the border sights in Israel/Palestine are targets of terrorist organizations that are opposed to the peace process (Gelbman 2008: 197; 202). In other former conflict zones, the only real safety concerns are related to standard travel precautions such as the need to drink clean water and watching out for crime. Despite its reputation, Northern Ireland is considered a relatively safe place by the standard of Western Europe, regardless of its conflicts. Ironically though, there has been a slight increase in crime in the years following The Troubles (Van Dijk 2008).

The Troubles were a time of great political and religious turbulence in Northern Ireland that lasted almost three decades. The conflict was between Irish nationalists (mostly Catholics) and the Ulster loyalists (mostly Protestants), while the British security forces tried to keep the peace. The Troubles lasted from 1968 to 1998 when the major factions participating in the fighting signed a peace agreement known as The Belfast Accords. The conflict resulted from many years of Irish unrest due to British rule.

Ireland was Great Britain's first colony. The British began to heavily colonize Ireland in the 16th century, and since then almost every generation has resisted

## Conflict Tourism

their rule in one way or another. On Easter Day, 1916, Irish nationalists made a serious attempt at overthrowing British rule. The leaders of a group that called itself the Irish Republican Army seized the General Post Office (GPO) in downtown Dublin, and declared an independent Irish Republic. A bloody siege ensued, the evidence of which can still be seen in the bullet holes all over the building's façade. The uprising (which happened in the middle of World War I) was a failure, and the leaders were executed by firing squad. The rebellion did, however, encourage other Irish nationalists to pick up the Irish Republican Army banner and continue the fight. By 1921, the conflict had turned into a nasty guerilla war. However, in 1922 a compromise was reached. The 26 counties in the mostly Republican/Catholic south would become an autonomous region known as the Irish Free State and the six, mostly Loyalist/Protestant counties in the north, would remain part of the United Kingdom. Eventually, the Irish Free State would gain full independence as the Republic of Ireland. Many of the Irish nationalists (particularly those in The North) were never satisfied with the partition, and by 1968 a new Irish Republican organization, calling itself the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) emerged. Their enemies were (and still are) the Loyalists and the British security forces. The following conflict, The Troubles, lasted three decades and is characterized by countless bombings, shootings, kidnappings, torture, and "terrorist-like" violence. A ceasefire agreement was reached in 1998, but by this time over 3,500 lives had been lost. Since then, with the exception of some actions on the part of a few militant splinter groups, Northern Ireland has remained relatively at peace.

IN SEPTEMBER 2009 I TRAVELED TO NORTHERN IRELAND as a flashpoint tourist. This was the first time I had toured a country specifically for conflict tourism of any kind. Visiting Northern Ireland was part of a larger family trip to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Initially, when I asked my parents if they wanted to go with me on a "little excursion" to Northern Ireland, they were understandably hesitant. This is not usually something that tourists do. After doing some independent research, they cautiously agreed and booked a room in Smarmore Castle in Ardee in The Republic of Ireland. From our castle in "The Republic", as it is called, we planned to make excursions into "The North."

As a conflict tourist's luck would have it, the morning of our first trip into Northern Ireland there was a paramilitary action. On September 8, 2009, members

of the Real Irish Republican Army, a PIRA splinter group that refused to sign the Belfast Accords, planted a command detonated improvised explosive device (IED) near the border. The IED was placed near Forkhill, Northern Ireland, and the cord and detonator were strung across the other side of the border in The Republic. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the British military discovered the IED, and it was diffused before it could be detonated. Because the detonator was located in The Republic, the PSNI could not pursue the paramilitaries (McDonald 2009).

On the drive north, I thought that we would have been stopped at some kind of PSNI or British military checkpoint at the border; but to my surprise, we didn't realize we were in the North until the GPS we were using switched from the Metric System to the Imperial one. I thought to myself "this can't be right," but after seeing a Sinn Fein political poster (Sinn Fein is commonly seen as the "political wing" or the PIRA), I was finally convinced I was in the North. As we drove through the suburbs into the town of Armagh it was clear that we were in IRA territory. We began to see graffiti that read "CIRA" for Continuity Irish Republican Army and saw wooden Irish tricolor stencils that read "IRA." I was very excited. Here I was in Northern Ireland in an IRA neighborhood.

When we entered the town of Armagh proper, we saw no signs of paramilitary support or activity. We got out, walked around, ate at a small dinner, and even did some shopping on Thomas Street. After my parents became comfortable, I told them that there were several deadly attacks on British security forces in the town of Armagh, and that two members of Royal Ulster Constabulary were killed on the very street we were standing; though, this peaceful town was not the former war zone that I had imagined. As we were leaving, I hit a curb and blew out a tire on our Ford Focus. A young Irish woman kindly guided us to a tire repair shop nearby. They were in the middle of closing shop, but they decided to stay open to help us. Irish hospitality! It's hard to believe that this friendly, surprisingly quiet Irish town was once a hotbed of paramilitary activity.

After the tire incident, we headed back toward The Republic. On the way we decided to visit the little village of Crossmaglen. Crossmaglen can be somewhat deceiving to tourists who are unfamiliar (or even unaware) of the partition of Ireland. It is just a few minutes drive north of the nonexistent border. There were no Union Jacks in sight. On the contrary, Irish tricolors and Irish language were

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everywhere. In the windows of the various businesses in the village were signs with metric and Euro symbols. The only real hint that you are in the North comes from the paramilitary murals and monuments.

After wandering around town for a while, we wandered into Murtagh's Guest House, a pub on the edge of the village, and ordered some beers. The bartender was reading a newspaper whose headline mentioned the attempted IED bombing of the previous day. He saw that I was looking at the headline and quickly covered it up with an apology. He said, "Don't get the wrong impression; it's not always like this." I went out on a limb and told him that we were interested in The Troubles. That got him going. As it turned out, the bartender, Aidan Murtagh, was more than willing to talk about it. He said that they (the locals) do not start conversation about The Troubles with tourists, but if the tourists show interest in the subject, they are more than happy to tell their side of the story. As a conflict tourist, I began to realize that the local people in the village thought it was very important for me to hear the "truth" about what happened. They wanted me to understand the violent history of the area from their perspective. A taxi driver who walked in overheard our conversation and asked Murtagh if he had shown us "the bullet hole." He said a sniper right outside the pub killed a British soldier in 1993. I looked at the taxi driver and asked "The famous South Armagh Sniper?" Both the taxi driver and Murtagh nodded and gave me a wicked grin.

As we walked around the side of the building, I saw a bullet hole bigger than my fist. Despite that The Troubles had been over for several years, this bullet hole served as a reminder of the bloodshed.

Similar memorials exist in other conflict tourism destinations. In Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are several spots in the city where mortar shells landed. These spots have been painted red and are called "Sarajevo Roses" (Bridge 2010).



**"The Bullet Hole"**

The bullet hole in Crossmaglen and the Sarajevo Roses are ghastly reminders to the locals (and conflict tourists) that human beings died at these places.

When we reentered the pub, Murtagh had a copy of *Bandit Country* out, a famous book about the PIRA in South Armagh, and had me read aloud a passage that described the incident. Murtagh was in the pub in 1993 when the attack occurred and heard the bullet go through the British soldier, Danny Blinco, and thud into the wall. Murtagh went outside to see a group of British soldiers standing around Blinco who had a massive pool of blood swelling around him. One of the soldiers was shaking Blinco and yelling "Keep your fucking eyes open Danny! Keep your fucking eyes open!" Another soldier ordered Murtagh to go back into the pub, and he quickly complied. After I put the book down, Murtagh told us that the British thought the sniper was almost a kilometer away but it was "probably closer to 300 meters." The way he said that, so matter-of-factly, gave me a slightly uncomfortable feeling, especially coming from a man who appeared to be so well connected as he did.

Murtagh asked me if I would be interested in going on a "political tour" in Belfast. I eagerly expressed my interest, and he told me he had an old PIRA contact name Kieran who gives political tours with his taxi service. Political tours in taxis are very popular in Northern Ireland (McDowell 2008: 407). This, however, was no ordinary political tour with a taxi service; this was the old PIRA's "Black Taxi" service. The Black Taxi Service got its start in the early days of The Troubles when paramilitaries blocked off the Republican/Catholic areas of Belfast. The roadblocks cut off normal bus and taxi service to the area, but members of the PIRA quickly capitalized on this by buying old, traditional style Austin FX4 taxicabs from London and bringing them into "Free Belfast." There are several Black Taxi services that are still owned and operated by former "volunteers" of the PIRA. Murtagh offered to contact Kieran and let him know we were coming.

Political tours in Northern Ireland are specifically designed for outsiders in that they paint a picture of a community that is repressed. The point of this is to legitimize paramilitary violence as a response to oppression (McDowell 2008: 412). The tour operators also charge money for this. Some might consider this a commoditization of violence. Perhaps it is, but it is also important to keep in mind that these tour operators need to make a living just like anyone else. In the case of taxi drivers in Belfast, if they are not driving around tourists, they are driving

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around regular customers. The next day we met up with Kieran at the central train station in Belfast. Kieran did not look like a “terrorist.” To me, he looked like any other redheaded Irishman in Belfast. As we rode in his taxi, he described the situation in Northern Ireland as a British occupation and repeatedly made references to the British as invaders and occupiers. I asked him what he thought of the Loyalists’ claims that Ireland is a part of Great Britain. He bluntly said, “If they want to live under a British Government, they can move to England.”

Our first stop on the political tour was the Catholic neighborhood of The Falls Road. Irish Republicanism is generally associated with left-wing politics, and is expressed in the Solidarity Wall that is located at the beginning of this neighborhood. The Solidarity Wall has murals dedicated to various left-wing revolutionary icons like guerilla warfare leader Che Guevara, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and slogans that are anti-globalist. As we were taking pictures of the Solidarity Wall, Kieran’s Loyalist/Protestant counterpart pulled up in their taxicab with some tourists. Kieran pointed them out to us and then started speaking very loudly about British occupation and police brutality. At one point he even exclaimed in the direction of the other group “And I don’t care if I’m speaking too loudly because they need to hear the truth!” This effort to teach us, the outsiders, the “truth” became a reoccurring theme throughout the tour.

Past the Solidarity Wall, is the heart of Catholic West Belfast. Murals depicting symbols of Irish Nationalism and armed PIRA paramilitaries can be seen in every direction. It is the murals and memorials that are the main attraction for tourists on political tours (McDowell 2008: 408). Every main street in the Falls Road area seemed to have a monument or memorial dedicated to PIRA or Sinn Fein members who were killed during the conflict. Kieran said that many of these memorials are especially dedicated to the fallen members who lived on those streets. People who have studied several political tours throughout Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast, noted that the murals and monuments in the various communities only record the dead who were involved in political and the paramilitary organizations. Places where informants or British security forces were killed remain unmarked. The Irish Republican tour guides, in particular, use this to reconstruct a version of history that is empathetic to their cause in order to teach the curious conflict tourist the “truth” about what happened (McDowell 2008: 411-412).



I asked Kieran if he had ever personally been involved in any attacks on British forces or Loyalist paramilitaries. As per the Belfast Accord, any action he took as a PIRA volunteer against British security forces or Loyalist paramilitaries before 1998 is considered legitimate warfare, and he could talk about it openly. Despite this, he and other former PIRA volunteers still do not trust the British, so they will never actually say they shot at soldiers and police. They will only hint at this, which is exactly what Kieran did.

Many tourists who go on political tours want authenticity. They are interested in seeing the “real” Northern Ireland (McDowell 2008: 410). As a conflict tourist, I was no different. While Kieran was recommended by Murtagh and he drove a Black Taxi that is stereotypically PIRA, I still did not know how authentic he and his stories were. All doubts were removed when we went to Sinn Fein Headquarters. The Sinn Fein Headquarters is one of those high security buildings with bullet and bomb resistant glass that has large men guarding the front with suspicious bulges under their jackets. We exited Kieran's taxicab and approached the front of the building simply to get a picture. One of the guards said, “Hey Kieran” and reached for the door. As he reached for it, it buzzed and opened. The fact that he called Kieran out by name and “buzzed” him in indicates, at the very least, that Kieran is well connected. Kieran told the guard that we were only there to take a picture of the front of the building, so we took our pictures and got back on the road.

Our next stop was the Irish Republican History Museum; this museum was located in a small building and was full of original artifacts relating to the Republican/Catholic side of The Troubles. The artifacts included everything from political posters to uniforms and weapons. One of the critiques of political tourism in Northern Ireland is that it commoditizes the violence that happened in that society (McDowell 2008: 406). Some critics might describe museums like this as a form of commoditization because they charge money to enter. The museum I was at did not charge but there was a donation box at the door. Because The Troubles recently ended, there are not many museums in Northern Ireland dedicated to it. While some might argue the museum makes the whole experience commodified, I disagree. These privately run museums are the only museums in Northern Ireland relating to this conflict.

However, I wasn't entirely comfortable with some aspects of my experience at

## Conflict Tourism

the museum. For example, this museum had decommissioned weapons that tourists were handed to pose with. Kieran knew the people in the museum and he, along with the curator, pulled several decommissioned weapons (including a Soviet made AK-47) out of a closet and handed them to me one at a time. As I stood there, flabbergasted at the whole idea, my father snapped away with his camera. This is not an unusual occurrence. The Tower Museum in Londonderry (Derry) has an AK-47 for the tourists as well (Brouillette 2006: 343). As I was posing with the decommissioned AK-47, I felt a sense of guilt. Until this point, I had no problem with



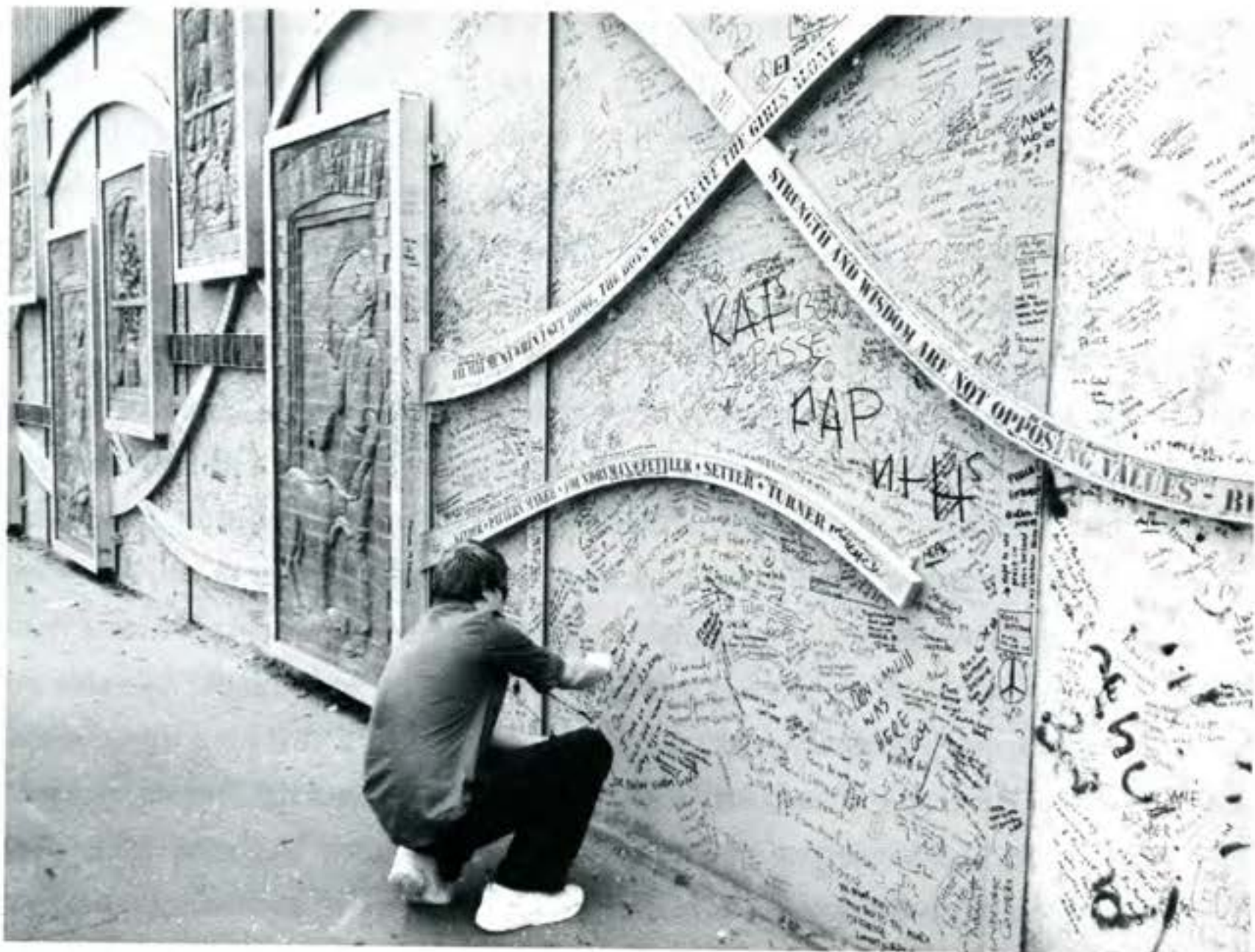
being a conflict tourist. I, like many people visiting conflict areas in Northern Ireland, was motivated by innocent curiosity (McDowell 2008: 417). Was this particular experience ethical both for the tourists and the tour operators? It's difficult to determine but it still made me feel as if we were all making light of The Troubles. It

### **Come to the north, play with our guns!**

felt like it was set up to be part of a "tourism" experi-

ence, especially as the museum operators pointed out the donation box as we left.

Continuing on with our taxi tour, we made our way to the dividing line between the Nationalist and Unionist neighborhoods. Despite the major decrease in violence since the Belfast Accord of 1998, sporadic and unorganized sectarian violence still occurs. One countermeasure to this unorganized violence is the construction of the so-called "Peace Wall" which runs between the Nationalist and Unionist neighborhoods. It has recently become popular for visitors to sign the Peace Wall, so Kieran brought out some felt pens when we reached the wall. I signed it on the Loyalist/Protestant side. The whole idea of a wall to separate the two communities seemed rather negative to me. It symbolized a state where conflict had been so intense and so deep-rooted, that a wall had to be erected to



## The Peace Wall is a constant reminder of The Troubles

separate the two communities involved in it. While walls may reduce crime and random or spontaneous violence, it also serves to make reminders of the conflict (and the resulting wall) a permanent part of the landscape.

As I signed the wall I began to notice how nervous Kieran was. He said that he still had enemies on “this side” that knew him and he did not want to provoke them. He insisted that we were safe though. As we drove further along the Loyalist/Protestant side, I started to see where his nervousness came from. On the Loyalist/ Protestant side, the murals seemed to be more violent and many were meant to serve as a warning to the Republican/Catholic side. One mural in particular had a sniper depicted in it, and it was painted in a way that the sniper seems to follow the viewer with his rifle. Needless to say, we did not spend much time with Kieran in the Loyalist/ Protestant area.

At the end of the tour, Kieran dropped us off at the train station. He thanked us for coming on the tour and said that he hoped we had a better understanding

## Conflict Tourism

about what really happened in Belfast during the Troubles. The “truth” or getting the message “right” is a big part of this kind of tourism. Kieran really emphasized this point with us. Throughout the taxi tour he conducted, he presented his side, the Nationalist/Catholic side, and had nothing positive or moderate to say about the other side in the conflict. He wanted us to hear the “truth” from his perspective. This one sided “truth” is not exclusive to the Nationalists/Catholics and is a common theme in political tours in Northern Ireland (McDowell 2008: 414).

As conflict tourists, we wanted to see more of the Protestant /Loyalist areas. We talked to one of the workers at the train station, who happened to be American, and he called one of his taxi driver friends who could take us on a tour. Patrick was a young man in his mid twenties who drove a more modern Toyota taxi. Like many younger people I talked to he said, “I’m not into politics... but I’m Catholic.” The people of Northern Ireland may not be diehards for one side or another, but they still identify with one. We told him how we wanted to see more of the Loyalist/ Protestant community, so we immediately headed toward the now Loyalist/Protestant community of Shankill Road and Sandy Row. Patrick spoke of The Troubles more neutrally than Kieran. He spoke of it as a ridiculous and pointless conflict in which atrocities were committed by both sides. As we stood by the famous “YOU ARE NOW ENTERING LOYALIST SANDY ROW” mural, which depicts a masked paramilitary bearing an AK-47, I asked Patrick if he felt safe. He replied, “I’m standing here aren’t I?” He said that for the younger generations, the conflict is not as real. Patrick felt that many of the “older people” who lived through that time period cannot get out of the old mindsets and move on. He said that they have simply seen too many horrible things for them to move on. As we rode the train back to the “safety” of our castle, we discussed what we had seen. My parents both said that they felt this was highly fascinating and worth the time and money. Like many conflict tourists, we described our experience as both “exciting” and “humbling” (Bridge 2010; Telegraph 2009).

In looking back on my experiences as a political tourist in Northern Ireland, I began to reflect on many things. Is conflict tourism ethical? Is commodification of violence ethical? The answer is just as broad and complex as the definition of conflict tourism itself. There is the whole question of a former warzone into a tourist attraction itself. Tourists can visit as neutral parties who can observe and judge independently. Based on this, they can draw conclusions and use

their own moral code to judge a local population. There is also debate on whether or not this form of tourism continues to promote the conflict. A mentality can emerge of "our sites vs. their sites." Both sides look to outsiders for legitimacy, and as long as this happens, there will be tensions in Northern Irish society (McDowell 2008: 406-408). The locals know that tourists come to Northern Ireland for political tourism and some locals have no problem exploiting the situation or the tourists. The government of Northern Ireland has also done its part to promote political tourism in its state-owned tourism business (McDowell 2008: 415-416). Perhaps the real ethical issue, in the case of Northern Ireland, is how conflict tourism may dominate the identity of a place and people. If conflict tourism in an area becomes too mainstream, then people will only associate the area with that violence. Patrick expressed this to me as we were leaving by saying, "Next time you come to Belfast, you should see some of the other sites." Perhaps he is right. Belfast, from a tourist's perspective, is a booming city complete with luxury hotels and nightlife. Northern Ireland itself is rich in history besides The Troubles. Unfortunately, its reputation has been scarred by more than three decades of political violence, hopefully, with time that will change. In the meantime, conflict tourism in Northern Ireland and other areas will continue to fascinate and draw tourists.

## Conflict Tourism

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# The Paranoid Individual

*An Analysis of Paranoia in the Writings of Philip K. Dick*

by Daniel Wyman



IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, where everyone seems connected by a smart-phone and Facebook account, maintaining individuality has become a major concern. It is easy to imagine that individual agency is threatened by this web of socialization. Professor Timothy Melley of Miami University writes that our culture is presented with “a sense that complex institutions and forces are arrayed against us, that they manipulate and control both our action and our thinking.” According to Melley, conspiracy theory looks for the headquarters of power, and such theories have become a fixture of modern culture. Indeed, conspiracy theory and paranoia can easily be seen in modern discourse. Few significant events have passed without groups pointing to some hidden orchestrators. An obvious example are the theories surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. More recently, there are those groups that claim to know a true cause of the September 11th World Trade Center attacks ([www.911truth.org](http://www.911truth.org)), or blame certain groups for the recent financial meltdown in the United States (*Inside Job*). With conspiracy theory as such a fixture of modern culture, it is no surprise to see it appear in works of science fiction, a genre that is primarily based off the writer’s extrapolation from concerns and issues that he or she sees in the world. Of course, any conversation of science fiction must mention Philip K. Dick, whose stories have been adapted into films, such as *Blade Runner* and *Minority Report*, and influenced others, like *The Matrix*, making his work integral to modern science fiction. Paranoia appears frequently in Dick’s work, where the protagonist finds himself in a world where everything seems focused on manipulating his actions and concealing the truth.

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One such story is Dick's 1969 novel *Ubik*. I believe it is possible to see the half-life world of *Ubik* as an allegory to twenty-first century culture, where online interactions have blurred the line between what is real and what is fake. Indeed, Melley cites the "sense that it has become difficult to know what is real and true in the world," as one of the main intellectual problems facing our culture. However, *Ubik*'s protagonist is not the victim of society as a whole, but is instead the target of a specific individual. The personification of this force, Melley asserts, is an attempt to defend the idea of individual agency in the face of social theory, which suggests that in fact there is no real force of manipulation at work. Such forces are only perceived because to see otherwise would be to admit that our actions are a result of the society in which we are a complicit part. These forces suggest that we play a role we cannot escape, and the absence of any force exerting control over us challenges the idea of individual agency. It is telling, then, that Dick's stories ascribe this manipulation to a single individual or group. Christopher Palmer, author of *Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern*, on Dick's writing writes that Dick was both a postmodernist and a humanist, whose characters have "the capacity to apprehend intense moral dilemmas, and to take responsibility" (33). Personifying social order as an individual controlling force, and assigning it specific desires and motivations, though it apparently threatens the individual, actually asserts the individual's freedom and significance. Though the individual is himself threatened, his individuality is affirmed by that threat.

Dick's fiction, and *Ubik* specifically, appears to contain both the ideas that the individual agent is capable of acting as an "authentic human," and also that the individualized force may only be the result of a paranoid hermeneutic, or a paranoid framework or worldview, because the ending of the novel suggests that nothing that happens in the story can definitively be considered real. In this essay, I will attempt to negotiate this conflict of views by looking at Dick's portrayal of the individual and the personified other, focusing specifically on *Ubik*. Dick once said that he liked to build universes that would fall apart

### **Hermeneutic**

- 1: A method or principle of interpretation**
- 2: A framework to guide the process of interpretation**



("Authentic Human Beings"). His stories may provide no definite conclusion, but they do negotiate the status of the individual, which has only become more significant in our hyper-connected world where we exist in a framework that may not be so different from the half-life network of *Ubik* or the Chew-Z reality in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

In *Ubik*, protagonist Joe Chip finds himself in a half-life world where objects continually revert to previous forms and reality itself is inconsistent. Eventually, Chip learns that the reality is controlled by another inhabitant of the half-life network: the teenager Jory, who seems to delight in causing Chip and others to suffer. Louisiana State University Professor Carl Freedman argues that paranoia is a reasonable ideology for our capitalist society that treats individuals as commodities and forces them to interpret their role in relation to other commodities (10). *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* provides an example of the commoditization of individuals. In this story, a group of characters have become obsessed with a game, which involves the use of drugs that allows the players to experience life as either the Perky Pat or Connie Companion doll. They are literally casting themselves as commodities and see their lives only in how they relate to the reality of the Perky Pat doll game. These individuals are most concerned with their relationship to the other commoditized individuals and their roles in the consumerism-driven game. Freeman argues:

*What is generally true of capitalism is particularly true of twentieth-century monopoly capitalism. "Consumerism"—that is, the increased importance of individual as distinct from productive consumption and the organized stimulation of the former by techniques such as advertising—saturates the social field with hieroglyphics to an extent unprecedented in all of human history (11).*

Perhaps in a nod to the idea of a society driven by consumption and economics, in *Ubik* Dick characterizes Chip by his inability to keep money, and opens with him arguing with his door, which threatens to sue if Chip won't pay for its services (24). Chip's lover, Pat, pays the door, and later asserts that without her, he would not have been able to leave his apartment (77). In this way, Chip's ability to act is constricted by money, and he is commoditized in a financial relationship between himself and Pat. At this time in the novel, Chip has yet to enter

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the half-life world, and this commoditization does seem to result simply from the prevalent social order.

It is later when Chip truly begins to notice things are wrong: the wrong faces appear on coins, objects regress to earlier forms, and people begin to die. Of course, there is a force controlling Chip's reality, so his paranoia is justified. Sigmund Freud saw paranoia as a "ruthless hermeneutic" and the paranoid as one who ascribes meaning to every detail in an all-encompassing view of the world (Freedman 8). Freedman agrees that paranoia springs logically into place in a capitalistic society, and he adds, "In a monopoly-capitalist state like modern America—intensely centralized and militarized but still governed according to bourgeois-democratic forms—conspiracy is no voluntaristic aberration but a structural necessity for ruling-class politics," suggesting that conspiracy is logical considering the form of American society (12). Such is the case in many of Dick's stories where the main character finds himself in a situation in which he actually is conspired against. In explanation, Freeman writes, "If Dick's protagonists tend to be paranoid, there is always much for them to be paranoid about. For they live in a world dominated by commodities and conspiracies; which is to say, a world not wholly unlike our own" (12). Dick shows how much of the modern world—both in his time and our own—is driven by conspiracy, or the possibility thereof.

Melley seems to agree with this, pointing to the Cold War and War on Terror: "If the government admits that some of its work is 'top secret,' the suspicion that we are being kept in the dark – that political outcomes are shaped by powerful, invisible agencies – is entirely reasonable. 'Paranoia,' in other words, has become a condition of good citizenship." However, Melley is quick to point out the distinction between this "healthy suspicion" and paranoia. "While skeptics such as Plato and Augustine saw the world only as a shadow of some truer existence, they nonetheless saw the visible world as a dim reflection, not a complete distortion of the true." He goes on to say that what makes one paranoid is the "near total refusal to accept appearance at face value," suggesting that much of what is perceived is in the eye of the beholder. Melley says, "The essence of paranoia is its reification of the symbolic order into a real agent." The personification of the social force into an "other" can be seen in both Jory in *Ubik* and Palmer Eldritch in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, both of whom are powerful individual entities who have power to control their worlds. Further, Melley asserts that "the modern

paranoiac . . . converts a complex system of social symbols into a powerful locus of intentionality and control – a quasi-divine plot to limit individual thought and action.” This is further illustrated by Jory and Palmer Eldritch, who are both ascribed near divine status.

This is significant, because if Jory is manipulating Chip, then Chip matters. If controlling his actions and deceiving him is important, then by extension, Chip is important as an individual. Melley claims that this is the reason for the paranoid worldview:

*Indeed, its specific content aside, paranoia can be seen as a panic-stricken defense of liberal individualism in the face of evidence for a more sociological account of human action. When a deeply held commitment to the liberal view of individual agency is shattered by the discovery of social influences, the result is often an all-or-nothing reaction in which the paranoiac magnifies the rather mundane fact of social influences into a nightmarish version of total external control.*

The attempt to see social influences as a the result of individual intent, Melley says, is a defense against philosophies such as Althusser's theory of ideology, which interpellates individuals as subjects, and Marxist theory, which imagines individuals as commodities with an ascribed value.

Another example that suggests the all-powerful individual is really just a perceived construct of society appears in Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. For much of the story, characters listen to the teachings of the prophet-like Mercer. However, it is eventually revealed that Mercer is only a paid actor. The society has constructed a divine force to worship. Thus, looking

at *Ubik* from this perspective, Jory could be interpreted as a metaphor for social order. It could be said that he is only perceived to exist but has no actual being and arises solely from Chip interpreting the signs around him in accordance with Freud's paranoid framework. In *Ubik*, one character states “There are Jorys in every moratorium. This battle goes on wherever you have half-lifers; it's a verity,

**Interpellates:**  
The process by which an ideology addresses a pre-ideological individual in order to produce an ideological subject

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a rule, of our kind of existence" (207). This gives weight to the idea that Jory's existence is the result of this "network," which can be seen representing the framework of society. And if this is the case, then Chip would be insignificant as an individual. Though he perceives a force controlling him, his actions are merely a result of the social framework in which he exists.

Of course, the fact remains that Dick chose to personify the "other" into an individual force, and his turning it into Melley's "quasi-divine" force suggests an attempt to defend individuality against the possibility that the individual is merely a piece moved completely by social pressures on an established framework. The status of the individual is clearly important to Dick. It can be seen as a basis for many of his stories that focus on the question "What is human?" Indeed, in his speech "How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later," Dick asked, "What constitutes the authentic human being?" this is one of his primary concerns that he attempted to address in his writing. He stated that he believed "the authentic human being is one of who instinctively knows what he should not do, and, in addition, he will balk at doing it." Palmer writes that Dick's "novels enact the historical tragedy of liberalism, its shaping of a monadic society which makes impossible, but also makes necessary, the action out of the most cherished individual and inter-subjective values of liberalism" (38). It appears that Dick is dedicated to establishing situations where the individual is capable of action, though he may not choose to take it. For example, in the short story "Adjustment Team," the protagonist Ed Fletcher sees the forces that control reality, and at their insistence, chooses to conceal the truth from his wife. The Hollywood adaptation of the same story, *The Adjustment Bureau*, heightened the individual's capacity to take action even in the face of significantly more powerful forces.

The ability of these personified forces to control a character's reality is one of the markers of Dick's stories. Jory is capable of changing things in the half-life world and Palmer Eldritch is effectively the god of the Chew-Z reality. However, Dick also presents a view of the world where reality doesn't seem to matter, what matters is the individual choosing to act authentically. The central point of *Ubik* is not the "reality" of the half-life world; the point is what action Chip decides to take. Christopher Palmer, writing on Dick's work, says, "Dick makes fictions of the disintegrations of the real in contemporary society: the action of perpetual change

both on what has previously existed, and on what is existing now but has no stable reality, because it is already marked by its inevitable dissolution" (32). This suggests that even in the world we live in, reality can be questioned. Dick is less interested in characters discovering what is real than in what they do with the knowledge, with stories like the novel *Time Out of Joint* that stresses the idea that there is something underneath the reality we see. It may be appropriate to relate this to the levels of simulation established by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard related the postmodern age with third order simulacrum where the simulation precedes the original, breaking down the distinction between representation and reality (8). Dick raised the issue of being unable to tell the difference between the real and fake copy in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, when

## Understanding Simulacrum

Jean Baudrillard examined reality in relation to signs and symbols. The first stage of simulacrum is a faithful copy. The second stage is a copy that twists and subverts the reality. The third stage of simulacrum is a copy with no original. That is, an object that pretends to represent something that does not actually exist, such as a photograph of a non-existent person. The final stage is pure simulation, where the images and symbols have no relationship to any reality, and the signs only point to other signs.

the protagonist, a bounty hunter named Decker, mistakes an electric toad for a real one, and also in his speech "How to Build A Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later," where he discusses the implications of replacing the fake animals at Disneyland with real ones. Writing on this topic, Melley says "only through a total distrust of their sense – a belief that the entire world might be a lie – that the protagonists of *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, and most of Dick's fiction actually break through the ideological shells containing them." In our postmodern society, "reality" no longer seems to be a relevant concern for the individual, and Dick's stories suggest that we can only control how we act in the world we live in. The characters in Dick's fiction are continually portrayed with the capacity for action. Melley says that, "throughout his career, Dick attempts to deepen the human – to affirm

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values such as solidarity and empathy and to endow his characters with the capacity to apprehend intense moral dilemmas, and to take responsibility" (33). The last time Chip appears in *Ubik*, he elects to take over the struggle against Jory. In the final chapter, a character outside of the half-life world sees Chip's face on a coin, mirroring Chip's early discovery that reality is breaking down (216). This may be another way that Dick points to how little reality matters, but it also could suggest that by acting authentically, Chip has transcended reality. Though Chip is ostensibly still in the half-life world, he now seems to have the ability to reach beyond it. He has become the individual capable of manipulating reality.

This is not the only time that Dick shows his protagonists eventually assuming the role of what at was originally perceived as a god-like force. In *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, the protagonist exchanges bodies with Palmer Eldritch, while in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, Decker eventually sees himself as Mercer, reenacting the struggles of Mercer's life. In *Time Out of Joint*, Raggle Gunn was placed into the world because of his own hallucinations and he is the capable of choosing to change things. As I've already established, the "other" is a quasi-divine force. By showing the individual becoming equal to this force, Dick's stories show the authentic individual becoming god. If that force is, as Melley suggests, merely the personification of the social order, then the individual becomes equal to that order. It is a force capable of breaking free of the control that order exerts. On the other hand, if the powerful other was merely an individual acting with its own purpose and intention, then, as Palmer says, "The conditions of the novels reflect an extreme, literal-minded liberalism: society is no more than a collection of individuals, monads, the world no more than an accumulation of objects" (36). There may be no social order that pressures individuals to action and they truly are capable of agency.

Paranoia results from individuals feeling their agency is threatened, and Dick's stories deal with this in two ways. First, they present paranoia as justified. It is a reasonable response to the outside forces threatening the character. Second, by individualizing that force, and establishing the protagonist characters on an equal level, the stories suggest that even if such forces are purely the embodiment of social order, the individual is still capable of overcoming them. In once sense, Dick's fiction establishes the authentic individual as a "quasi-divine" force. In an interconnected world where it may be impossible to determine the difference

between the real and simulation, Dick's stories demonstrate the unimportance of reality to the actual being of the individual. The materiality of the world has no bearing on the individual's ability to choose between what is right and what is wrong. In Dick's fiction, the person that makes that choice has the capacity of transcending reality. In the real world, perhaps this suggests that the authentic individual who will balk at doing something that is wrong, is the individual capable of breaking away from the forces of social control and thus is capable of asserting his own freedom.

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# Using Tide to Clean, Doesn't Mean it's Green

*An Argument Against Greenwashing*

**by Casey Rogers**



*"The Earth's resources are limited and valuable, and we have an obligation to future generations to use these resources wisely."*

## **Tide: Safety Statement**

WHEN YOU WASH YOUR CLOTHES, YOU CHOOSE a detergent that touts itself as an eco-friendly detergent. After all, why not help the environment with your everyday activities? You've just seen an ad for a new Tide product called Free and Gentle, a Proctor and Gamble creation, telling you all about how great Tide is for the environment. So you go to the store and spend the average \$12 on a bottle that gets you approximately 30 loads. When you look at the back of the bottle, you don't see a list of ingredients, but if the commercial says it's good for the environment, you're sure it is. The product states that it is free of harmful chemicals and scents that can cause irritation. Unfortunately, Proctor & Gamble exaggerates those claims, and when it comes to some products, including Tide Free and Gentle laundry detergent as will be seen, they are guilty of Greenwashing. Greenwashing, according to *The Triple Bottom Line*, a book that defines the pillars of sustainability as people, profits, and the planet, by Andrew Savitz, is defined as "a kind of corporate image-laundering in regard to the environment" (Savitz, & Weber, 2006 pg. 136). In the easiest terms, Greenwashing occurs when marketers make claims about a product's environmental attributes that are false or cannot be verified. Whether it be chemical ingredients, the amount of liquid used for proper efficiency, or unsubstantiated claims that improperly put Tide ahead of its competitors, there is really only one reason Tide can say it is better than the rest,

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and that is because it is designed to be easier on machines. Overall, it would seem that Proctor & Gamble know how to Greenwash a consumer into buying their “eco-friendly” products rather than providing a detergent that is truly “green.” Overall, it would seem that Proctor & Gamble know how to Greenwash a consumer into buying their “eco-friendly” products rather than providing a detergent that is truly “green”.

Now, you might be asking, “what’s actually in this stuff?” Laundry detergent manufacturers are not required by law to print the ingredients of the detergent on the label. Technically, they are not required to print them anywhere besides in confidential company memos, in order to ensure that the company’s “secret formulas” are protected. Many have tried to explain the roles the consumer can play in examining a product’s environmental qualities, and as was written in “The Role of Management Systems in Stakeholder Partnerships”, “although a consumer can often assess a product’s quality through inspection, the environmental attributes of a product are usually impossible to determine.” (King, 2006, pg 229) The truth is you will rarely get a straight answer if you simply look at the list of ingredients on any detergent. Typically, there is a cryptic message such as “Ingredients include surfactants (anionic and nonionic) and enzymes.” Investigating what that actually means can be quite a challenge. Proctor & Gamble is notorious for not including ingredients whenever possible, however questionable this seems. It would make sense if a company were proud of their ‘green products’ that they would be more forthcoming in publishing what exactly made those products green. Doing a simple analysis of what is published on that label shows quite a different side to the eco-friendly ingredients Tide supposedly uses.

Now, what exactly is a Surfactant? They are, among other things, the first ingredient included on the short list Tide puts on the back of its bottles. To most, it’s just another chemical, but in reality it is much more. Surfactants are a group of synthetic chemicals that are not only slow to biodegrade in the environment but are also known to be toxic to human health. They are used as wetting agents that lower the surface tension of a liquid, allowing easier spreading, and lowering

**Proctor & Gamble is notorious for not including ingredients whenever possible, however questionable this seems.**

of the interfacial tension of a liquid, which is when adhesive forces between one chemical in a liquid state and another chemical in a gaseous, liquid, or solid state interact and have a reaction only on their surfaces. "The dynamics of absorption of surfactants is of great importance for practical applications such as foaming, emulsifying or coating processes, where bubbles or drops are rapidly generated and need to be stabilized." ("Surfactant:," 2010) A study was reported in the paper "Are Leading brand laundry detergents environmentally friendly?" which stated:

*Researchers in England have found that in trace amounts they activate estrogen receptors in cells, which in turn, alters the activity of certain genes. For example, in experiments they (surfactants) have been found to stimulate the growth of breast cancer cells and feminize male fish. One member of this family of chemicals is used as a common spermicide, indicating the general level of high biological toxicity associated with these compounds.(2005)*

In another study, done by the American Society for Microbiology (2001), a surfactant listed on the ingredients found on Tide Free and Gentle's website called Linear Alkylbenzene Sulfonate was found to be extremely harmful to Nitrosomonas and Nitrospira. These two types of bacteria are found in virtually every marine system. Their purpose is to naturally break down enzymes in the water to help create a healthier ecosystem. When these two bacteria were exposed to Linear Alkylbenzene Sulfonate, however, the study showed that the bacteria's growth and metabolic rate slowed dramatically until, after five days, it stopped all together. Without these naturally occurring bacteria, our marine water system's healthy balance is greatly altered, to the extent where we could see entire trophic-levels extinguished in areas, leading to a potential collapse within the food chain. (Brandt, Hesselsoe, Roslev, Henriksen, & Sorenson, 2001) In a comparison between the original Tide and Tide Free and Gentle, Proctor & Gamble has cut down on their use of chemicals. According to Tide.com, Tide Free and Gentle uses 2 less surfactants than the original Tide. The problem with this data, however, is that they do not tell you the actual amounts of each chemical being used, so there is no way to see if a substitution or an addition of another chemical is being used to replace those removed.

It is useful to compare Tide Free and Gentle to a new laundry detergent called

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Method. This detergent is 95% plant based and claims that all of its ingredients are listed on the bottle, with a full description of each chemical used on their website. While Method contains surfactants just as Tide does, Method's surfactants, similar to many other plant-based detergents, are all derived from coconut oil and other natural oils that are readily biodegradable. Every other chemical used in the plant-based detergent is derived from corn sugars, vegetable sources, or other easily biodegradable synthetic sources. Non-biodegradable surfactants are not good for the environment or for human health. Without easier ways to decompose both within our natural environment but also within our own bodies, surfactants should be something to be conscious of in everyday purchases.

To some, the scent of the laundry detergent can be the most appealing aspect of the product, regardless of its environmental implications. It is true that Tide leaves clothes smelling great after washing them; however, it is important to be aware of what actually makes clothes smell so fragrantly. Even in "fragrance-free" detergents, there are some scent-additives because laundry detergent alone does not have a pleasing smell. According to The Simple Dollar, an online magazine that published an article called "Making your own laundry detergent", without the addition of essential oils to make the detergent smell good, you have one of two options: a detergent that smells like vinegar, or a detergent that smells like borax. (Trent, 2008) Chemical groups called phthalates are made to give the fragrance to your laundry detergent, including all of the fragrances in Tide. Many people do not think about the negative effects of fragrance additives in their detergents, however, those fragrances are some of the most harmful parts of the detergent for human health and for the environment. Phthalates tend to be very stable; they do not degrade in the environment easily, and exert toxic effects on fish and mammals.

**One of the phthalates most commonly used in detergents in the United States has been listed as a reproductive toxin in the European Union, said to cause male and female infertility, miscarriages, birth defects, and impaired child development.**

Individuals with sensitivities can experience skin, eye, and nose irritations or allergic reactions that can be caused by these substances. ("Green laundry detergents," 2010) One of the phthalates most commonly used in detergents in the United States has been listed as a reproductive toxin in the European Union, said to cause male and female infertility, miscarriages, birth defects, and impaired child development. Other phthalates have been banned in the EU because of liver and kidney toxicity as well. ("EUROPA: environment and," 2010) According to American Chemistry, an organization which advocates for setting exposure limits to chemicals, the correlation between exposure to phthalates and issues of human health has not yet been proven. ("American chemistry: phthalates,") What needs to be addressed then is how to compare the research of two scientifically recognized groups if their findings on the toxicity of phthalates are so different.

Not only does Tide's advertising mislead its consumers about its chemical additives, but also about the amount in the bottle in relation to the amount needed for proper washing. The bottle says you should get 32 loads for the 50 oz of liquid in the bottle. The amount of detergent advised to use varies with the brand of detergent and the size of the load to wash. That supposed 32 loads is great as long as you only fill the cup up to the first line, but that first line is only good for "small-medium" loads. According to Tide's website, "the amount of clothing that equals a medium-sized load is approximately the same as filling the washer up to a medium capacity." The problem with this is that not every washer has the same capacity. Actually, almost every washer has a different capacity. Consumers are supposed to determine their washer capacity and independently determine how much laundry and detergent constitute a 'medium-sized' load.

The question becomes then, how much detergent do we actually need to use? It is important to recognize that the detergent companies are out to sell you (the consumer) detergent. They are going to encourage their customers in any way possible to get them to buy and use Tide detergent. What that does to the environment, however, is to be determined. Proctor & Gamble say their product is eco-friendly because it uses fewer chemicals per load than other detergents. But in reality, according to an article published in *Backwoods Magazine* titled "Clean up your Act", Tide users end up using almost twice as much detergent

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if they follow recommended use levels, so twice as many chemicals are being released into our waterways with each load being done due to the lack of a standardized load size and a standardized system of measuring the detergent needed for that load. (Blanchard, 2008) Compare Tide Free and Gentle to Method or similar detergents. Method comes in a bottle that fits in the palm of your hand and is concentrated so it only contains 20 oz. of detergent. According to the bottle's packaging, this 20oz bottle will get you 50 medium sized loads, as is the standard for plant-based concentrated detergents. While the average Tide-user who follows the recommended levels will use about 1.56oz per load, the average Method-user will go through only about .4oz per load, even with slight variations in washer load size.

A common misconception is that a mainstream brand like Tide will clean better than its competitors. The advertisers at Proctor & Gamble are extremely talented when it comes to making consumers believe that their product works better than the rest. Their commercials are some of the best examples of Green washing to date. The commercials state how much more effective Tide is compared to other companies, and how much more satisfied you will be with Proctor & Gamble's product, but their evidence is unsubstantiated. In a news report by CBS titled "Going Green when Cleaning Clothes", a live test was performed to check the claims of the latest and greatest "green" detergents. What the study found was that while Tide Free and Clear worked well, other detergents like Seventh Generation and Naturally Clean worked better. With considerations to the environment, the CBS news professionals suggested using an alternative detergent to Tide whenever possible.

Though Tide may be guilty of Greenwashing, there are some positives to their detergents as well. According to Ken Sapp, a local repairman for Dewaard and Bode, more often than not washing machines break down because the pump stops working. He explained that non-Tide and eco-friendly products (excluding Tide Free and Clear) are notoriously harder on the machine's pumps because they are not as liquefied as Tide. Sapp explained that in almost 80% of the broken pump cases the repair shop gets the owner used an eco-friendly product in the machine for more than half of the machine's life. According to a EurekaAlert.org article by American Chemical Society's Judah Ginsberg (2006), Tide was not just made to help clean clothes better;

it was made to revolutionize the washing machine. (Ginsberg, 2006) Looking at Tide.com, under Tide Free and Gentle ingredients, 18 chemicals are listed. Looking at Method detergents website, 14 chemicals are listed, with smaller quantities of both liquid and chemicals. This makes proving that detergents like Method are harder on machines a challenge. Scientists are still researching whether or not there is a proven scientific correlation between machine life and Tide; however, evidence seems to support the argument that Tide products are better for machine life.

Many consumers see the benefit of longer machine life and make that choice. There is evidence to suggest that a Tide product is both better for a machine and worse for the environment, but it is up to the consumer to decide which effect is more important. According to Tide.com, Tide Free and Gentle's number one ingredient is water. It has to be in order for its number two ingredient, Alcholethoxy Sulfate, to be effective in fighting stains. A study by scientists at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, examined the relationship between surfactants and water and found that the relationship between the

two was a very exact one. Without enough of the surfactant, the detergent would be ineffective, but without enough water within the detergent the surfactant was proven useless in hitting all of the stain. It was thus proven that with synthetic chemicals, like the surfactants used in Tide Free and Gentle, it was best to

**When shopping for a new laundry detergent, remember that it takes more to be eco-friendly than ads, commercials, & appealing label design.**

produce a more watered down detergent that could utilize more chemicals. (Boyd-Boland, & Pawliszyn, 1996, pg 1521-1529) On one hand, Tide Free and Gentle is watered down; it uses more chemicals and is worse for the environment than virtually any other eco-friendly detergent, however on the other side, putting a washing machine in a landfill is also not very eco-friendly.

Proctor & Gamble marketers have found a way to pick up on what most human beings feel is desirable in a product and advertise to those specifications. They know consumers want a product which they think is not only going to work well

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but is also going to help them be better stewards of the planet. With Tide Free and Clear, Proctor & Gamble shows ads of happy consumers washing clothes in springs and drying them in meadows while using an eco-friendly product such as theirs. What those commercials leave out though is all of the chemicals that pollute those springs and kill those meadows. While being overall better for washing machines, Tide Free and Clear is guilty of a huge Greenwashing ploy, one that leaves out the harmful chemicals and inefficient liquid standards and over-exaggerates the outcome of the product. When shopping for a new laundry detergent, remember that it takes more to be eco-friendly than ads, commercials, and appealing label design. To get a truly eco-friendly product, make sure to see if the company can substantiate their claims and present you with evidence to show their product is environmentally conscious.



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# Agent Orange and Narratives of Suffering

by Anne d'Aquino, Andrea d'Aquino,  
and Lauren Sutton

## INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War (1961-1975) ended almost a half-century ago, and both the United States and Vietnam have put most of it behind them. But the legacy of Agent Orange, the dioxin-containing herbicide that the U.S. sprayed over large portions of Vietnam to defoliate it and remove cover for the enemy, continues to be a potent and divisive issue. The toxicity of dioxin has affected Vietnam in a variety of ways, particularly through its effects on the reproductive health of women. Families who lived in the vicinity of "Agent Orange spray zones" or who have become exposed to dioxin because of proximity to or from the use of resources from "Agent Orange hot spots" have experienced severe reproductive complications. From birth defects to miscarriages, this chemical has had an effect through generations of families, and has disproportionately affected women and children due to their biological susceptibilities. Unexpected miscarriages and birth defects have added a greater level of complexity to this public health issue. As the U.S. and the Vietnam progress toward resolving disputes over the responsibility and consequences of this weapon of war, defining "victims" and what should be done for them continues to be an issue today.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Bailey. "Tackling the Agent Orange Legacy in Vietnam," *Alliance Magazine*, June 1, 2010. <http://www.alliancemagazine.org/en/content/tackling-agent-orange-legacy-vietnam>. Other sources on Agent Orange and Operation Ranch Hand include Allen Myers. "Vietnam: 30 Years later, war crimes go on and on," *Green Left*, April 27, 2005. Accessed September 28, 2011. <http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/32657>; Steven and Jeanne Stellman. "Exposure Opportunity Models for Agent Orange, Dioxin, and Other Military Herbicides Used in Vietnam, 1961-1971". *Journal of Exposure Analysis & Environmental Epidemiology*, 14 no. 4 (2004): 354-362.

This paper explains the “victims” issue from several perspectives. It will, first of all, look at the different representations and narratives of Agent Orange in Vietnam, particularly as it pertains to those who are identified or represented as “victims” of Agent Orange. Scientists, governments, and activists have told different stories and identified victims in different ways. We examine here how those who have suffered the consequence of dioxin exposure have become identified as “victims” by investigating the problem of exposure as well as the politics that have shaped and defined it. The challenge of defining precisely how Agent Orange “exposure” and toxicity function has opened up a narrative space for different representations of “victims.” We will also examine the fundamental difference of exposure in women compared to men, and try to evaluate the consequences that arise from this differentiation. Finally, this paper will examine the issue of responsibility, the relationship of Agent Orange narratives to responsibility, and how it has both shaped and challenged efforts to define victims and who gets to do so.

The subjects of “Agent Orange as a weapon of war” as well as the history and consequences of dioxin in the Vietnamese environment have now generated a small scholarship. In order to study and research this topic, we used this as well as traditional resources and field research to answer questions about Agent Orange. But we also discovered, through the work of Diane Fox, an anthropologist who has worked with Vietnamese Agent Orange victims, and through our own field work, that “victims” have an important voice, too, and they deserve to be more than characters in other narratives or numbers in a case study. We recognized that the relationship between toxicity, exposure, and responsibility has shifted in recent years for several reasons. Some of these reasons include the development of the capacity to quantify toxin levels in both the environment and in people, and this capacity has in turn shaped who is considered exposed. The people who continue to be affected today by dioxin residues are different than the people who were affected during the war, and this has deepened and made more complex the narratives that explain the consequences of Agent Orange and the responsibility for it. Many factors such as the uncertainty behind the number of victims, the uncertainty about how dioxin causes health problems, the possible end of “exposure” as a result of dioxin clean-up efforts, and the controversy over responsibility, have all added complexity to the larger

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story of Agent Orange and health in Vietnam. These factors have provoked dispute, uncertainty, and misunderstanding at the same time that they have moved the actors in this issue in the direction of a resolution. But they have not erased the fundamental fact that Agent Orange has victimized large numbers of Vietnamese people. Many of these people were not even born when the Vietnam War took place, and what remains very clear is that something more needs to be done about those who have suffered and continue to suffer from this act of war.

### WHAT WAS AGENT ORANGE?

Agent Orange was the code name of a specific herbicide used during the war in Vietnam that was named after the identifying stripe of paint around the barrels in which it was shipped. The name has also been used as a generic term for all the chemicals used throughout the war, or more specifically, for the toxic dioxin it contained. It has also become a symbol of the long-lasting consequences of the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> Diane Fox described Agent Orange as something that “has taken on other layers of meaning, at times becoming the name of a disease, or a metaphor for the consequences of war,” and not just an herbicide.<sup>3</sup> As a strategy of war, in the herbicide spraying project titled Operation Ranch Hand, the United States military dropped a number of defoliants on ten percent of the rice fields and forested landscapes of Vietnam, to remove cover for the enemy and to destroy food crops that might feed them. The most common of these was Agent Orange.<sup>4</sup> Agent Orange is a 50/50 mixture of 2,4,5-Trichlorophenoxyacetic acid and 2,4-Dichlorophenoxyacetic acid. When produced at unsafe temperatures and an increased rate of production, this mixture creates an extremely toxic carcinogenic by-product: 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-para-dioxin, commonly

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<sup>2</sup>Diane Fox, in H-Diplo Roundtable Review on David Zierler's *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the Scientists Who Changed the Way We Think about the Environment*. H-Diplo Roundtable Review.8, no 11 (2011) <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable/PDF/Roundtable-XIII-11.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Diane Fox. “Chemical Politic and the Hazards of Modern Warfare: Agent Orange,” unpublished manuscript, (2009).

Additional manuscripts of Diane Fox's that we consulted include: “Speaking with Vietnamese Women on the Consequences of War, Writing against Silence and Forgetting,” Unpublished manuscript, (2009); “Frames,” Unpublished manuscript, (2009); “Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the United States,” unpublished manuscript, (2009). Our thanks to Dr. Fox for sharing these with us.

<sup>4</sup>Mart Stewart, “Agent Orange,” in *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History*, eds. J.R. McNeill and Carolyn Merchants (New York: Routledge, 2004), 22-23.

called TCDD or dioxin.<sup>5</sup> This toxic chemical constituent entered the environment and the lives of many Vietnamese families by way of Operation Ranch Hand.

Dioxin persists differently in a variety of environments. When exposed to the sun (and as most Agent Orange was sprayed on South Vietnam's jungle canopy, it was therefore exposed), dioxin has a half-life of only one to two days. When dioxin is found in humans, the half-life is between 7-11 years, but when dioxin finds its way into sediment (usually around stagnant water sources such as lakes or ponds) the half-life can be up to 100 years.<sup>6</sup> In those areas where Agent Orange was stored and often spilled, especially in Operation Ranch Hand staging areas, dioxin levels were extremely high, making dioxin more likely to persist in the environment. It has been over forty years since the final spraying of Agent Orange, and to this day the toxicity of dioxin continues to affect Vietnam in a variety of ways.<sup>7</sup>

The toxicity and persistence of dioxin has unfolded into a long and complicated story due to its physical and chemical properties. Dioxin is a halogenated compound, a compound in which a halogen (e.g., fluorine, chlorine, bromine, or iodine) has been attached to carbons. Halogenated compounds, such as dioxin, have a high affinity for organic materials, low water solubility, and exhibit lipophilic ("lipid loving") properties, making it an exceptionally persistent herbicide.<sup>8</sup> Dioxin persists in sediment because it resists breakdown by the majority of soil bacteria, and accumulates in the human body because it is fat-soluble. The persistent and toxic effects of chlorinated insecticides and herbicides are so significant, that they have been discontinued for most agricultural uses in

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5 E. Sterling, Hurley, M. and Minh, L.D. *Vietnam: A Natural History* (New Haven: Yale University, 2006), 8.

6 Agent Orange Record. "Denying Them Food and Cover." Accessed October 12, 2011. [http://www.agentorangerecord.com/impact\\_on\\_vietnam/environment/](http://www.agentorangerecord.com/impact_on_vietnam/environment/)

7 Hatfield Consultants, "Comprehensive Assessment of Dioxin Contamination in Da Nang Airport, Viet Nam: Environmental Levels, Human Exposure and Options for Mitigating Impacts." (Vancouver, B.C.: Hatfield Consultants, 2009): 1-27. <http://www.hatfieldgroup.com/UserFiles/File/AgentOrangeReports/DANDIII1450/Da%20Nang%202009%20Report.pdf>.

8 Monica J. Casper, *Synthetic Planet: Chemical Politics and the Hazards of Modern Life* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 73-89.

Lipophilic translates to "Lipid loving". It is a property of compounds and molecules which are not water soluble. They combine with fats, lipids and oils, and do not mix with water. This property often causes them to form a film on water, rather than mix with it. Water therefore cannot "dilute" lipophilic compounds

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the United States.<sup>9</sup> Dioxin is chemically unreactive and insoluble in water, so although it is non-mobile independently, it can migrate from sources through natural forces such as air, water, and soil.<sup>10</sup> This migration of the chemical pushes it into local bodies of water, often reaching lakes and streams where inhabitants go for food. The residues of dioxin have now accumulated in places in Vietnam's environment, and in an especially distinctive way through the food chain. Its toxic effects are biomagnified up the food chain, where it reaches many Vietnamese families who unknowingly consume contaminated animals for meals. As dioxin percolates into the bodies and tissues of fish and other animals and up trophic levels, its concentration increases. By the time it is consumed by humans, at the top of the food chain, it can be found in toxic concentrations. Through exposure to dioxin, the human body becomes a new and different "environment" for this chemical to interact and persist in, and one in which it has especially deleterious effects.

Exposure in Vietnam works in a way that is significantly different in women than in men. Dioxin is an endocrine-disrupting chemical with a highly toxic effect on the reproductive system.<sup>11</sup> The mechanisms by which endocrine-disruptors act are not completely clear, but it is understood that they interfere with the production and function of many different growth factor enzymes, and most importantly, hormones.<sup>12</sup> Hormones coordinate the complex development of the fetus, signaling genes to turn on and off and directing cellular replication. The placenta secretes these hormones to the fetus; they are necessary for proper growth and development. The placenta is a transporter of oxygen,

<sup>9</sup> L.G. Wade, *Organic Chemistry; Custom Edition* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2010), 210.

<sup>10</sup> Hatfield Consultants, "Comprehensive Assessment of Dioxin Contamination in Da Nang Airport, Viet Nam," (2009):65-98. <http://www.hatfieldgroup.com/UserFiles/File/AgentOrangeReports/DANDI-II1450/Da%20Nang%202009%20Report.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Leslie J. Reagan, "Representations and Reproductive Hazards of Agent Orange," *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, 39 no. 1 (2011): 54-61.

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy Langston, *Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1-15.

nutrients, waste material, and carbon dioxide between mother and fetus. Endocrine disruptors such as dioxin can cross the placenta to the bloodstream of the fetus, leading ultimately to negative effects at birth. The developing fetus can be particularly sensitive to the tiny chemical-induced differences in hormones, such as those caused by dioxin, leading to possible birth defects and miscarriages. Dioxin's effects and toxicity are much more evident and critical in the early stages of human development than in adults, making its persistence in the human body during reproductive years especially dangerous.<sup>13</sup> By interfering in the development of the fetus, dioxin increases prenatal mortality and the risk of endometriosis, as well as causes birth defects.

As a developmental toxicant, dioxin can interfere with the normal development of a child. This attribute of dioxin is significant after the birth of the child when the mother must choose whether or not to breast feed. The tendency for dioxins to be stored in fatty tissues results in the chemical accumulation of dioxins in breast tissue and milk during lactation in women.<sup>14</sup> The infant's daily dioxin intake, by way of the mother's breast milk, can then be one to two orders of magnitude higher (ten to twenty times higher) than adults.<sup>15</sup> Once in the body of her child, dioxin acts as a neurotoxin and has the potential to harm the brain and central nervous system. The issue of dioxin accumulation in breast milk poses the question of safety versus necessity for many Vietnamese mothers. Breast milk is extremely important for child development, and many Vietnamese mothers have to ask themselves if the benefits of breast-feeding outweigh the risks. Dr. Nguyen Phuong Tan, Chief of the Rehabilitation Department in Peace Village at the Tu Du Obstetrics Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, explained to us that most mothers still choose to breast feed their children, because they are convinced that dioxin has likely already entered the body of their children while they were still in their womb. Dioxin's path and its effects on a fetus are

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy Langston, *Toxic Bodies*, 1-15.

<sup>14</sup> Leslie J. Reagan, "Representations and Reproductive Hazards of Agent Orange," *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, 39 no. 1 (2011): 54-61.

<sup>15</sup> European Commission: Health & Consumer Protection Directorate - General, "Opinion of the Scientific Committee on Food (SCF) on the Risk Assessment of Dioxins and Dioxin-like PCBs in Food," (2000): 27-49. Accessed March 13, 2012. [http://ec.europa.eu/food/fs/sc/scf/out78\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/food/fs/sc/scf/out78_en.pdf)

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unclear, leaving both mothers and scientists uncertain of who is at risk of being exposed, and how to behave to avoid further exposure.<sup>16</sup>

Some steps have been taken to determine the exposure of dioxin in-utero, but still fail to provide proof of cause-effect relationships between Agent Orange and birth defects. A lack of “substantial scientific evidence” sustains the ambiguity of whether or not dioxin is the cause of what appears to be health problems connected with dioxin exposure and thus the determination of who is a victim and who is not. Medical scientists have apparently developed a test to determine whether a baby’s blood contains some dioxin, but it costs up to one thousand U.S. dollars to administer it. Allen Myers, who discusses this test in a 2005 article, notes that, “even if the test were done and confirmed the presence of dioxin, it would still not be regarded as proof.”<sup>17</sup> Children with dioxin related malformations may not even have traces of it in their blood because their disorders are caused by dioxin induced damage of their parents’ chromosomes, and not by the presence of dioxin in their own systems.<sup>18</sup>

Mothers who have been exposed to Agent Orange face the difficult question of whether they are willing to carry the possible burden of raising a child with disabilities. This is partly due to the uncertainty about what dioxin is and what it does. In a culture where disabilities are not openly discussed, and where healthy families represent prosperous families, exposed mothers must decide whether they are willing to risk exposing their fetus to dioxin. The uncertainty surrounding the possible outcomes of childbirth leaves both families and doctors unsure of the better choice: to conceive a child or potentially end a family legacy from progressing to the next generation. The difficulties which mothers of disabled children endure extend beyond the medical. Vietnamese mothers who give birth to children with birth defects and disorders ask questions about fate and destiny, but find no answers to their questions of “how” or “why.”

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Dr. Nguyen Phuong Tan, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, December 21, 2011. Because of an unusually high number of children begin born with developmental deformities and birth defects likely caused by dioxin exposure, health support stations and special schools, such as Peace Village, a special wing of the Tu Du Obstetrics Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, have been established to help support Agent Orange victims who are children.

<sup>17</sup> Allen Myers, “Vietnam: 30 Years later, war crimes go on and on,” *Green Left*, April 27, 2005, accessed September 28, 2011, <http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/32657>.

<sup>18</sup> Myers, “Vietnam: 30 Years later.”



Families and friends often conclude that these consequences are “punishment” for “bad lives”. According to Dr. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong, the director of Tu Du Hospital, hospital staff usually does not discuss the real reason for a baby’s death; they simply state that the baby was “too weak.”<sup>19</sup> Dr. Phuong says, “They are afraid that if they tell the truth, husbands will abandon wives who they think are contaminated by dioxin.” The distress of marital rejection cause women to often feel “inferior” for not being able to give birth to normal children or any children at all.<sup>20</sup> A mother’s ability to bear a child is extremely important to families, and uncertain outcomes at birth can leave women confused but determined to deliver a “normal” child. In some cases, women may take desperate measures for the sake of their families and futures. According to Diane Fox, mothers have experienced both extremes of this medical atrocity. From delivering several children in order to bear a “normal” one, to undergoing expensive and painful medical procedures, women have made drastic choices in hopes of overcoming the consequences of the effects of dioxin exposure and the complex afflictions this exposure has possibly caused. During an interview with Mrs. Hông, a woman living in Biên Hòa, Fox inquired about the number of children she has. Mrs. Hông replied, “It’s a lot, if you are talking about the pregnancies.” But Mrs. Hông soon revealed that only four survived, all girls.<sup>21</sup> Another woman Fox interviewed shared the suffering she endured when she chose to undergo sterilization after having miscarriages as well as children with severe disabilities. She explained that she did it for her husband and her family, so that they would not have to endure another regretful birth. The pain was both physical and emotional, as she never properly recovered from the operation. The social stigma associated with infertility (or the inability to bear a child) is even more distressing. The medical concerns connected to this public health issues are serious, but these are amplified by social and familial issues.

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<sup>19</sup> Myers, “Vietnam: 30 Years later.”

<sup>20</sup> Diane Fox, “Speaking with Vietnamese Women on the Consequences of War,” unpublished manuscript, (2009).

<sup>21</sup> Diane Fox, “Chemical Politics and the Hazards of Modern Warfare,” unpublished manuscript, (2009).

Women tend to have greater body mass, higher percent fat and more fatty-tissue making accumulation potential much more probable in women contrasted to men. Vietnamese women are exceptionally susceptible to the consequences of this chemical because of work-related exposure, consumption of dioxin accumulated food, and attempts at building a family with exposed husbands.

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During our conversation with Dr. Nguyen Phuong Tan, she explained that over 90% of children that were born with birth defects this year were abandoned. She said this most commonly occurs when the child has very serious defects. When we asked if the mother is shamed or reprimanded by society for choosing to abandon a child or abort a pregnancy, Dr. Tan said that only the mother and her doctor know of the child's defect, and thus the decision to have an abortion is only between them. However, Vietnamese society understands this, and does not question a mother who "loses" her child before pregnancy. She noted that some very religious families choose to keep the child, no matter what its condition. Our conversation illustrated that due to a changing history, the consequences of Agent Orange are being engaged in very different ways by the current generation. However, it is clear that the decisions mothers face now are still just as difficult today as they were over 30 years ago. When mothers do choose to keep a child, the difficulties are often more substantial than families anticipate.

Several social anxieties related to having a child born with a disability beleaguer Vietnamese families. Families must consider who will take care of their disabled children when they get old. Not only is having a child with a birth defect expensive, but it is also time-consuming and arduous work. From pre-chewing food for children who cannot masticate, to continuously carrying a child whose limbs lack the muscle to ambulate or move, households must alter their way of life in order to support and nurture their child.<sup>22</sup> Many disabled children are unable to help their own families with physical labor or chores, and are thus sent to places such as Peace Village, a special wing of the Tu Du Obstetrics Hospital for Agent Orange victims, where they can be cared for. This alleviates some pressures on parents, but adds to the social stress of parenting children with disabilities.<sup>23</sup> Families must also modify the custom in which the child takes care of their parents as they grow up. Many Vietnamese parents with disabled children may try to hide their children for fear of being blamed or not being able to marry off their healthy children.<sup>24</sup> Families must also think about the custom of having children to carry on their family legacy. Parents may

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<sup>22</sup> Diane Fox, "Chemical Politics and the Hazards of Modern Warfare," unpublished manuscript, (2009).

<sup>23</sup> Allen Myers. "Vietnam: 30 Years later, war crimes go on and on," Green Left, April 27, 2005. Accessed September 28, 2011. <http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/32657>.

<sup>24</sup> Diane Fox, "Speaking with Vietnamese Women on the Consequences of War," unpublished manuscript, (2009).

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Though the gallery of images of Agent Orange victims at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City has been criticized for sensationalism, it is consistent with other exhibits on the Vietnam/American War in the museum and the museum's larger purpose of enhancing peace by 'remembering atrocities.

therefore persist in their attempts to give birth to more babies until they have one "normal" child. This resolution often leads to mothers bearing several more children, some of whom are born with disabilities, which in turn increases the expenses of health care and also pushes these families into difficult financial situations. Dioxin is a women's and family issue that is also closely linked to poverty and economic disparities. Families often live in poverty trying to take care of their children, frequently taking long and expensive trips to distant hospitals to purchase costly medication.

In general, "next generation" victims have become a very complex issue in Vietnam, and of a kind that is open to controversy about cause, and about responsibility and solution. The legacy of Agent Orange continues and is embodied in the disabilities of the children of women who have become exposed to Agent Orange—and exposed sometimes quite indirectly and years after the war was over. At the same time, just how and to what extent Agent Orange is the cause of disabilities is not always clear, given the complexity of the relationship

between exposure, toxicity, and reproductive health. Vietnamese families, but especially women, face economic, political, and social burdens when bearing children with disabilities connected to Agent Orange, forcing them to make controversial decisions for the future of their families

### **NARRATIVES OF SUFFERING**

Who qualifies as an Agent Orange victim and what this label means remains an intense and indefinite subject.<sup>25</sup> Each “victim” has his or her own story or narrative, expressing what the title “victim” signifies for them, and these in turn are explained collectively by different groups who have a stake in the process of defining dioxin victims.<sup>26</sup> Individuals or groups of individuals create personal narratives of suffering based on their unique experience and ability to reason and make sense of their affliction.<sup>27</sup> As we discuss the different general narratives of suffering we will refer to three major stakeholders: the United States government, the Vietnamese government, and victims’ associations (usually NGOs) who actively seek support for those they represent. These groups are not necessarily exclusive of each other. Speaking with persons from each of these groups also allowed us to add to our understanding of the narratives of individual Agent Orange victims as well. For each perspective we have sought to understand what has been said indirectly about the issue, as well as what features of the Agent Orange issue each group or individual deems essential.

The way in which individuals or groups of individuals view their illness or affliction reflects the significance of this illness to those involved. Illness and disease are culturally constructed, and so is the physical and emotional treatment

<sup>25</sup> Arnold Schechter, and Thomas A. Gasiewicz, *Dioxins and Health* (New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing, 2nd. ed., 2003), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Diane Fox, “Chemical Politic and the Hazards of Modern Warfare,” unpublished manuscript, (2009).

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering Healing, and the Human Condition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 5-233. The scholarship on the social and cultural construction of various diseases is large, but a good place to begin is Susan Sontag’s observations on cancer, tuberculosis and AIDs in *Illness as Metaphor and AIDs and its Metaphors* (Picador, 2001). That diseases are also constructed by social conditions is fundamental to Paul Farmer’s work, and also to the project by the World Health Organization on the social determinants of health: CSDH, “Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health.” Final Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2008.

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that comes to be part of the treatment of each illness.<sup>28</sup> Some diseases are culturally accepted and others are stigmatized. For example, the validity of the claims of veterans that they were suffering from Agent Orange related illnesses were not always accepted by the U.S. Veterans Association in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>29</sup> U.S. veterans began to suffer from various diseases in the 1980s that they attributed to Agent Orange exposure, but these were not validated or recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs until the 1990s; a comprehensive list of “associated diseases” was not compiled until 2001. This list can now be found on the US Department of Veterans Affairs website and is the foundation for benefits given to veterans who suffer from these ailments. Forty years after exposure, Agent Orange diseases among U.S. Vietnam War veterans have acquired recognition and visibility—they have been fully constructed—and veterans can finally receive compensation for their illnesses and diseases. The Agent Orange narrative in both the U.S. and Vietnam has evolved over time. There are many different narratives of Agent Orange suffering, but what we must be most aware of, are where the narratives come from, and who is telling the story.

Our experience at Peace Village in Ho Chi Minh City provided an opportunity to see the consequences of Agent Orange first hand, as well as, introduce us to a performance of suffering that engaged our emotions. As we were led down the halls of Peace Village, the doors to community living quarters were held open for us to view in. Children with missing limbs and malformed body parts greeted us with blank stares, unusual noises, or friendly waves and smiles. One of the children was in the midst of writing in a journal of perfect penmanship, utilizing nothing more than her toes—both of her arms were missing. A room farther down the hall had more children who were awakened from their naps in order to greet the “foreigners.” Two young boys were wriggling aggressively while strapped to their beds in order to prevent them from hurting themselves, while other children were barely moving, merely blinking and staring.

We were ushered into another room, where we began our interview with Dr. Nguyen Phuong Tan, Chief of the Rehabilitation department in Peace Village,

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<sup>28</sup> A. Kleinman, V. Das, and M. Lock, *Social Suffering* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 1-10.

<sup>29</sup> David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 6.

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who was accompanied by Duc Nguyen, a surviving conjoined twin who was separated from his brother. Duc's brother died four years ago, but Duc survived, got married, and had children. He has a global reputation as an icon for Agent Orange Victims. Duc is an Agent Orange survivor whose personal saga of survival has become a representation of victory over suffering, at the same time that he has become a poster child for Peace Village and all victims of Agent Orange. Duc did not say anything throughout our interview, but merely sat and listened. Dr. Tan began the interview and her presentation by explaining the history of Agent Orange, and its toxic and deadly effects. She directed our attention to photos around the room of children and adults with severe malformations. The photos were striking, and painful to look at. She explained that many children do not survive, and if they do, they do not live very long.

Dr. Tan then addressed the issue of responsibility and redress. She explained that in order for victims to receive compensation from the U.S. government, the U.S. wants proof that dioxin is the culprit via scientific evidence such as blood tests, but these are difficult and expensive. She told us that their doctors and scientists do not have the money to do these tests, so the debate about compensation remains in a stalemate. The only way they could move forward with their research and their cause was to inspire the support of people like us who were interested in researching and helping those who were victims of Agent Orange.

Dr. Tan told us that she wanted to show us a room where they only allow "researchers" to visit. She ushered us down a hallway, and into a room at the corner of the building that contained shelves of glass jars containing lifeless fetuses with malformations. Every person in the room was speechless. We had read about this room in our preliminary research, but reading about it did not prepare us for what we felt when we actually entered it. We stood at the center of the room, trying not to move too close to the jars, while Dr. Tan watched us. She noted that perhaps because we were "scientists" we were not as emotional as other visitors she had guided through Peace Village. Perhaps our state of shock masked our emotions, but there was no doubt that this room had evoked something very intense within each of us. Dr. Tan's statement about our "apparent lack of emotion" made us wonder if the purpose of this room was in fact to simply provoke the emotions that we were "not physically exhibiting." We thought that it was very interesting that all of the jars in the room were labeled in English, as if this room was not

Perhaps our trip to Peace Village was merely a political presentation that was intended to inflict feelings of guilt, hurt and pain. But at the same time, the evidence was clear to all of us that Agent Orange exposure had caused a great deal of suffering and pain, and that this was an ongoing legacy of the Vietnam War.

necessarily for research by the Vietnamese doctors, but rather a sort of viewing room for foreigners. As we exited the room, it was clear to all of us that no matter the larger purpose of this Agent Orange tour, the images we saw would be ones we would never forget.

In the hallway, Dr. Tan thanked us, and gave us "Peace Village" pins that were apparently standard issue for foreigners who visited Peace Village. She thanked us for researching Agent Orange, and for our intentions to spread our understanding. Dr. Tan explained

that there are not many young people who are as interested in this subject as we were. These final remarks ended our meeting, and we left Peace Village with overflowing emotions, confusion, and a lack of words.

Our meeting with Dr. Tan provoked many questions. Was this meeting merely another planned political presentation? Was the purpose of the fetus room viewing designed more to appeal to emotions rather than to make a scientific case? Perhaps our trip to Peace Village was merely a political presentation that was intended to inflict feelings of guilt, hurt and pain. But at the same time, the evidence was clear to all of us that Agent Orange exposure had caused a great deal of suffering and pain, and that this was an ongoing legacy of the Vietnam War. Dr. Tan's presentation may have been designed as a political performance rather than to make a scientific case, but our contact with the children in the hospital as well as the sight of the fetuses reminded us that this narrative had victims who were more than just figures in a study. No matter what this presentation's purpose was, it was clear to us that there were very real and intense repercussions still occurring from the spraying of Agent Orange and these "victims" who were not even part of the war continue to suffer because of the legacy. This legacy of war has been depicted in a similar way in the narratives of Agent Orange activist groups such as the Vietnam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA). VAVA is the most outspoken group in Vietnam for the victims of Agent Orange and

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claims to be “. . . the only organization that represents the millions of victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam.”<sup>30</sup> They work in close contact with other NGOs such as the Ford Foundation and the Vietnamese Red Cross. Vietnamese non-governmental organizations always have close ties to government initiatives and structures. Important governmental officials in Vietnam usually chair NGOs such as VAVA, and it is therefore impossible to completely separate a government narrative from a victims’ association narrative. Because of this there is considerable overlap, and indeed government and NGO narratives are similar but issued from different sources.

An example of this overlap was seen in an extended meeting and conversation we had with Major General-Journalist Tran Ngoc Tho, the President of VAVA, and Dang Hong Nhut, the Vice President and Secretary of VAVA. Major General Tho and Vice President Nhut were generous with their time and informative. On December 22, 2011, they talked with us at length at the VAVA office in Ho Chi Minh City, and provided us with several informational pamphlets, books, and even gifts that AO victims had hand crafted. The interview began with Vice President Dang Hong Nhut explaining that she had seen many people suffer and die as a result of Agent Orange. She went on to explain that she and the President of VAVA were both victims themselves. She noted that she had several miscarriages, and eventually stopped trying to conceive. The introduction began as a solemn testimony of death, pain and suffering. As the two representatives explained the issue of Agent Orange from their perspectives, they directed our attention to pictures of children with no arms watering flowers, and of a young girl writing with her feet. This long introduction to VAVA’s mission and history identified but did not focus on causes, but instead on consequences and on suffering, and provoked in us a genuine sympathy for the women and children both before us and in surrounding representations that was quite beyond anything we were studying. It also inspired a desire to help the cause.

The conversation then turned from suffering to responsibility and the issue of compensation. Vice-president Dang Hong Nhut repeatedly noted that the Vietnamese

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<sup>30</sup> Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong, “Agent Orange In Vietnam,” testimony, July 15, 2010 in Hearing before the Committee on House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment. Text from: Statement. Available on: FDCH Congressional Testimony. Accessed October 24, 2011. <http://lifetransition.com/Images/Testimony%20of%20Dr.%20Nguyen%20Thi%20Ngoc%20Phuong.pdf>



wanted to “end this chapter in history and open the door to a new friendship with America.” It was clear to us that the two representatives were passionate about what they were trying to accomplish. However, they repeated many phrases and statements during the interview that were similar to explanations scripted on their website.<sup>31</sup> When we asked President Tran Ngoc Tho who would have the capacity to end this “chapter,” he explained that when the U.S. government accepted responsibility for their actions and provided adequate compensation for the people whose health had been damaged by Agent Orange, then a new friendship could be forged and the past left behind. We continued to talk about VAVA’s plans regarding compensation and lawsuits, as well as their plans to resolve this issue through continuous court appearances. Whether the U.S. government would ever openly admit responsibility for an act of war appeared to be irrelevant to VAVA’s efforts—here the story they told became more political, designed to procure important resources, and less about suffering and its immediate causes. We did not inquire much further about how realistic this agenda might have been, as the two representatives directed our attention to the back of a pamphlet that described VAVA’s future plans when provided with funding. On the back of the pamphlet, a large “village” was designed meticulously with notes and plans beneath it. The Vice President explained that this would be the “Orange Village,” a place for Agent Orange victims that they were planning on building.

Much like our interview with Dr. Tan at Peace Village, the end of the meeting with VAVA included photos, gifts, inspiring words, and mixed emotions. The President and Vice President shook our hands passionately, thanked us for caring, and asked us to do what we could to assist them, and to simply share our understanding. They then provided us with hand crafted pins and key chains that Agent Orange victims had made the night before, and once again said with friendly smiles that they are ready to begin a new chapter with America, and were prepared to embark on a new friendship.<sup>32</sup>

It was a meeting of mixed emotions: we felt grief, an eagerness to help, some skepticism, then hopefulness, and finally, a kinship to the cause. The meeting

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<sup>31</sup> Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange’s website can be found here: [www.vava.org.vn](http://www.vava.org.vn). Accessed November 2, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Vietnam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, December 22, 2012.

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"The authors at the VAVA office in Ho Chi Minh City. From left, VAVA President Dang Vu Hiep, Anne d'Aquino, Andrea d'Aquino, VAVA Vice President Dang Hong Nhut, and Lauren Sutton."

felt personal and intimate, but at the same time revealed similarly themed presentations as in our other interviews and encounters. This suggested to us that perhaps this meeting was not as personal and individualized as we believed. It was instead perhaps a scripted political presentation designed and structured specifically for foreigners, researchers, and persons interested in Agent Orange activism—at the same time that the emotional content and the suffering at the heart of the narrative had an inescapable effect.

Our experience talking with the activists at VAVA and Peace Village reinforced and provided us with an understanding of the narrative that is most important to them—one that mixes genuine depictions of suffering with a clear political agenda. While the U.S. government has explained that attempting to decipher who is a victim and who is not is an impossible task, VAVA has stated

the importance of pinpointing victims worldwide. The performances at Peace Village and by VAVA were difficult to separate from each other, and both presented, in the end, narratives that were quite similar, though presented in different ways. Most importantly and beyond the overlap, these narratives had a common core, one that in fact the official position of the U.S. government also shares: whether or not these individuals can be identified as proven Agent Orange "victims," the people who were presented to us at Peace Village and VAVA had experienced real pain and suffering regardless of the cause.

### WHO COUNTS AS A VICTIM?

Again, though all parties agree on the fact of suffering, just who has suffered because of Agent Orange and who has not continues to be one of the main differences between the narratives of different stakeholders in the Agent Orange controversy. The term "victim" itself is so meaningful and yet all at once, so meaningless. How do we reckon victims? Who are they, and how many are there? "Victim" is a loaded term, one that imparts a sense of responsibility as well as blame.<sup>33</sup> The Vietnamese government estimates that three million Vietnamese people were exposed to Agent Orange and its toxic dioxin, but the origin of the three million figure is unclear. Different official sources have presented different numbers over the last fifteen years as well. The lack of certainty or clarity in the reporting of numbers of victims makes one thing very apparent, that it's difficult, or maybe even impossible, to reckon victims in standard epidemiological terms. Some argue that millions continue to live with the devastating effects of Agent Orange, while others argue that Agent Orange's effects are not enough to constitute a health issue. Are there three million, five million, or ten thousand victims who have been affected by dioxin laden Agent Orange? Who is being counted: the directly exposed, the indirectly exposed? And how do we decide who continues to be affected? Can we make this discernment?

Epidemiology quantifies the prevalence and distribution of diseases, effectively assessing determinants of diseases. Although the epidemiology surrounding Agent

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<sup>33</sup> According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, a "victim" is one that is acted on and usually adversely affected by a force or agent.

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Orange is obscure, it does make one clear conclusion: dioxin, even in tiny amounts such as parts per trillion, is associated with severe health damage that can shorten the lives of people exposed to it, and potentially that of offspring and future generations. The World Health Organization has recommended that human ingestion of dioxin in adults should stay within the limits of 1-4 picograms per kilogram of body weight per day (pg/kg of body weight/day), or 70 picograms per kilogram of body weight per month which is equal to about 0.07 parts per trillion in the blood.<sup>34</sup> The general environmental limit in most countries is 1,000 ppt TEQ (toxic equivalent) in soils and 100 ppt in the sediment. The critical effects used to define this tolerable daily intake (TDI) were effects on the reproductive, developmental and endocrine systems.

Between 1968 and 2002, Arnold Schecter along with several other scientists, collaborated to publish their research on Agent Orange and dioxin levels within Vietnam. They addressed the question of toxicity directly and precisely. The purpose of their research was to establish the levels of dioxin within multiple Vietnamese human and environmental samples, and compare these levels with "normal," acceptable levels. Their findings included measured levels within fish and human breast milk from fish-eating Vietnamese women living in an area sprayed during 1970. Schecter concluded that clearly elevated levels of dioxin from Agent Orange were present in many southern Vietnam residents. He found that although levels of TCDD and of other dioxins varied, breast milk TCDD levels of up to 1,850 parts per trillion (ppt) were found in fish-eating southern residents living in sprayed villages. This is an alarmingly high amount of dioxin, in comparison to people in industrial nations such as the United States who have a baseline of 3-7 ppt of dioxin in their blood. Levels of TCDD in northern Vietnam residents were also found to be much lower, with typical levels at 1-2 ppt.<sup>35</sup> Fish in highly contaminated areas were found to have quite high TCDD levels as were some food, wildlife, soil and sediment samples collected from 1970 to 2001 in

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<sup>34</sup> M. Kogevinas, "Human Health Effects of Dioxins: Cancer, Reproductive and Endocrine System Effects," *Human Reproduction Update* 7(3) (2001): 331-337, accessed November 2, 2011, <http://humupd.oxfordjournals.org/content/7/3/331.full.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Arnold Schecter, et al. "Collaborative USA-Vietnamese Agent Orange Research From 1968 to 2002: Also Including German, Canadian, Dutch, Japanese and Finnish Scientific Collaboration," 2-12. Last modified March 2002. Accessed November 12, 2011. [http://www.aafv.org/IMG/pdf/16-Arnold\\_Schecter2.pdf](http://www.aafv.org/IMG/pdf/16-Arnold_Schecter2.pdf).

sprayed areas of Vietnam. Most recently, elevated TCDD levels were found in blood and environmental samples from Bien Hoa City, a city 35 kilometers north of Ho Chi Minh City, where an airbase used for Agent Orange spraying was located. Most people sampled had elevated blood TCDD; some sediment had elevated TCDD levels; and several samples of soil were highly contaminated with TCDD. Fish-eaters, children born after Agent Orange spraying ended, and newcomers to the city, had elevated TCDD levels, documenting exposure after cessation of spraying in 1971.<sup>36</sup> The finding of high levels of TCDD in humans and in food during and shortly after Agent Orange spraying was not unexpected. However, the finding of elevated levels from exposure three decades after spraying ended was unexpected. This indicates that TCDD can remain in the environment and work its way through the food chain for substantial periods of time following initial contamination.

But what have epidemiological studies concluded about Agent Orange? How has epidemiology helped define who is a victim of Agent Orange? Who counts? The U.S. Institute of Medicine's July 2009 report cited sufficient evidence of an association between exposure to Agent Orange's dioxin and five illnesses: soft-tissue sarcoma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, Hodgkin's disease, and chloracne. The report also found evidence suggesting an association with cancer, Parkinson's disease, type 2 diabetes and a handful of other illnesses and diseases in exposed persons' offspring.<sup>37</sup> In Vietnam, the Vietnamese Red Cross also associates the following with exposure to dioxin: cancer, reproductive abnormalities and congenital deformities such as cleft lip, cleft palate, club foot, muscle malformations, paralysis and many others along with some developmental disabilities. With so many potential illnesses that could potentially be contracted from dioxin exposure, it's easy to see how the issue of the health effects of Agent Orange has become a grey area.

Our own research in Vietnam revealed an extensive history of how "victims" have been defined. The range of victims include women who were breathing,

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<sup>36</sup> Arnold Schechter, "Collaborative USA-Vietnamese Agent Orange Research From": 1-12.

<sup>37</sup> Arnold Schechter, and John D. Constable, "Commentary: Agent Orange and Birth Defects in Vietnam," *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35, no. 5 (2006): 1230-1232, <http://ije.oxfordjournals.org/content/35/5/1230.full>. Accessed November 23, 2011.

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walking, and eating without needed assistance, but still asserting that they were affected by Agent Orange in their reproductive systems, to children missing limbs or other body parts. As we spoke at length with several victims of Agent Orange, it became clear that each narrative, whether from doctors, victims at Peace Village, or activists at VAVA, shared a similar point of reference—numbers of victims. The narratives all worked in tandem with the numbers. In effect, whether or not the narratives begin with numbers or dismiss them altogether, each narrative is ultimately shaped by these figures. The problem of coming up with accurate numbers and the caveats to the data that is used is never fully explained in any of the narratives.

The question still remains, then, who counts as a victim? The lack of an answer leads us to believe that perhaps this is not the right question to be asking. Perhaps, there is a larger, more important question to be examined if key differences between conflicting narratives are to be resolved in the interest of those who have indeed suffered because of Agent Orange. Perhaps what we should really be focusing on does not pertain to numbers, but rather the actions necessary to mitigate this issue. Questions of responsibility and just how many—thousands or millions—victims of Agent Orange has created aside, what exactly needs to be done?

### **WHO BEARS RESPONSIBILITY?**

An ongoing point of concern in the evolving relations between the U.S. and Vietnam is this last “ghost of war”: what have been the health effects of Agent Orange on the Vietnamese people and what should the U.S. government be doing about it? What the United States has done for the victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam is very different than what the U.S. government has done for its own veterans of the Vietnam War. As stated previously, the United States now has a clearly defined policy when treating U.S. veterans that were exposed to Agent Orange that acknowledges the health effects of Agent Orange and dioxin exposure.

Cain and Kulantzick, journalists with the Washington Monthly, briefly address this question in their article, “Agent of Influence.” They suggest the United States cannot openly accept responsibility for the consequences of this seemingly obvious chemical warfare for two reasons: the United States implemented

Operation Ranch Hand in a time of war, and if the U.S. admits responsibility, this would open the floodgates for other post-war claims of compensation from other countries where U.S. war has occurred.<sup>38</sup> It is important to realize that the United States will not budge in their denial of full responsibility, and the Vietnamese people and government should not count on a change of policy on this point from the United States. In a phone interview, Arnold Schecter, a dioxin expert who has studied dioxin for over twenty years and published more than one hundred articles on the subject, suggested that in this context perhaps “how many victims,” is not the right question to ask. He explained that studies on dioxin conducted in Vietnam may never establish certainty of causation of birth-defects said to be dioxin-related.<sup>39</sup> Poorly constructed studies with too little funding as well as high government involvement are just two reasons dioxin studies in Vietnam conducted by the Vietnamese have been unsuccessful.<sup>40</sup>

At a Congressional hearing on the matter in 2010, U.S. State Department policy confirmed this position. Spokesperson Dr. John Wilson explained: “A comprehensive study of who is a ‘victim’ in Vietnam would be impossible to conduct.”<sup>41</sup> Energy and funds used to identify “victims” are not the most efficient or sensible way for the United States government to spend money to help alleviate this issue. It makes more sense, Schecter says, for the United States to do exactly what they are doing; taking a humanitarian approach to improve healthcare for those in need and clean up “hot spots” in the environment.<sup>42</sup> Charles Bailey, the director of Special Initiative on Agent Orange/Dioxin at the Ford Foundation agreed, “We identified early on that the clean-up and containment of the dioxin ‘hot spots’ was the most feasible starting point for the US and Vietnam to work together. The more difficult issues, and where the challenges lie now, have to do with resources

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<sup>38</sup> Cain and Kulantzick, “Agent of Influence,” A3-A6.

<sup>39</sup> Arnold Schecter, phone interview by Andrea d’Aquino. November 10, 2011. We would like to thank Dr. Schecter for taking the time to speak with us.

<sup>40</sup> Mark A. Brown. 2011. “Science Versus Policy in Establishing Equitable Agent Orange Disability Compensation Policy.” *Military Medicine*: 176 (36): 35-40. Accessed November 2, 2011.

<sup>41</sup> John Wilson. “Agent Orange In Vietnam,” testimony, July 15, 2010. Hearing before the Committee on House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment. Text from: Statement. Available on: FDCH Congressional Testimony. Accessed October 24, 2011. <http://lifetransition.com/Images/Testimony%20of%20Dr.%20Nguyen%20Thi%20Ngoc%20Phuong.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> Arnold Schecter, phone interview, November 10, 2011.

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for human health, increasing opportunities for people with disabilities and encouraging long-term institutional development.”<sup>43</sup> In a briefing at the U.S. Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City, Political Officer Sarah Takats spoke to us about her opinions on how the U.S. Government addresses the issue of Agent Orange today. She noted that one of the biggest ways that the United States is tackling the issue in a “concrete way” is through funding allocated to the clean up of a dioxin hotspot near Da Nang. She said that the United States is firmly committed to helping those in Vietnam, no matter what the cost. Near the end of our conversation, we presented Ms. Takats with the question of whether she thinks the United States is doing “enough” to help the Vietnamese people who have been affected by the ongoing consequences of Agent Orange. She paused to contemplate the question, and then explained that in her own personal opinion something else could be done, but concluded that the United States should simply do what they can to help the people of Vietnam.<sup>44</sup>

While the United States has been able to side step what some would say is its responsibility to address, the policy of the United States government also makes sense as policy. The U.S. has responded to claims against its actions, even if not as directly as Vietnamese activists would like. Though they have not been willing to admit responsibility, they have acknowledged that dioxin hotspots need to be cleaned up and are willing to support this, and have also acknowledged that Vietnamese with disabilities have experienced real suffering. Again, on the question of suffering, all of the narratives share common ground. The Agent Orange narrative of suffering has been dynamic in its creation and may very well continue to evolve. Changes in this narrative will be substantial when environmental dioxin contamination cleanup is concluded and will continue to be molded and shaped by those who have experienced and will continue to experience the health consequences of exposure. Our conversation with VAVA made it clear, however, that what will not change in this narrative is the Vietnamese efforts to continue fighting for their goal—to compel the U.S. government to take responsibility for an ongoing legacy of toxicity and injury to the health of the Vietnamese people.

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Bailey, “Tackling the Agent Orange Legacy in Vietnam.”

<sup>44</sup> “Vietnam and America study abroad course briefing at U.S. Consulate,” Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, December 15, 2011.



## WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Recent events have proved to help publicize the issue of Agent Orange as well as inspire global assistance. Some of these events include published reports that have provided specific evidence not available even ten years ago regarding dioxin contamination; plans for dioxin clean-up of Agent Orange “hotspots” that would end exposure in those places; and highly publicized lawsuits against the U.S. government and against Agent Orange manufacturers by litigants representing Agent Orange victims in Vietnam.

In order to begin to identify what might be done specifically to clean up environments contaminated with dioxin, the Hatfield Associates, an independent Canadian environmental service agency, has since 1994 engaged in a series of carefully conducted studies to determine Agent Orange dioxin levels in several locales in Vietnam. The Hatfield Consultants conducted an investigation of residual dioxin contamination around former military sites, such as the Da Nang airport, while developing proposals at the same time for mitigation measures to help prevent the local population from future exposure.<sup>45</sup>

The Hatfield Consultants have now published reports based on their research on dioxin contamination, and these have yielded quantitative evidence that dissolves controversy on contamination of the “hotspots” they have studied. The evidence is incontrovertible—study sites at Da Nang, Bien Hoa, and several other locations are contaminated with dioxin, as a direct consequence of Agent Orange use and spillage during the Vietnam War. They have also studied carefully the potential paths of exposure (see above section on exposure) in and around these sites, and this research has reinforced the claims that dioxin has moved through the physical environment and into the bodies of inhabitants near dioxin hotspots. These reports by the Hatfield Consultants not only emphasize the need for action to clean up these sites, but have stirred the United States to take even more initiative in clean-up efforts. This initiative and proposals by this independent research agency was eventually followed by the United State government’s assistance in mitigating this environmental and public health issue. In 2003 the

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<sup>45</sup> Hatfield Consultants, “Comprehensive Assessment of Dioxin Contamination in Da Nang Airport, Viet Nam: Environmental Levels, Human Exposure and Options for Mitigating Impacts.” (Vancouver, B.C.: Hatfield Consultants, 2009).

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Ford Foundation began funding the Hatfield Consultants' research through substantial grants until August of 2009.<sup>46</sup> And since 2007, the U.S. government has appropriated nearly 42 million US dollars for environmental remediation, health, and disabilities activities in Da Nang and for related programs throughout Vietnam. Their clean-up efforts have been a part of a larger goal to improve bilateral relations with Vietnam. The U.S. government has not formally accepted responsibility for Agent Orange contamination, but they have begun to do something. In May of 2011, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Vietnam's Ministry of National Defense (MND) signed an agreement to support collaboration between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments and set out a road map for implementation of dioxin clean-up efforts at the Da Nang Airport. Major General Do Minh Tuan, Deputy Commander of the Vietnamese Air Defense Command stated, "The successful implementation of this project [will] mark the development of the good relationship between the two governments and people of Vietnam and the United States."<sup>47</sup>

Although the clearly documented environmental and health repercussions of Agent Orange have encouraged the United States to help with clean-up efforts of the Da Nang airport, their position legally has not and will not change. A number of lawsuits for Agent Orange compensation against Dow and Monsanto have been settled out of court over the last thirty years, but VAVA has consistently tried to sue the U.S. government for compensation for victims in judicial courts, federal courts, and were recently denied a trial by the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>48</sup> At the hearing about Agent Orange and Vietnam before the Congressional Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment on July 15, 2010, the U.S. government stated a two-step program to deal with this issue. This included assistance and support for removal of dioxin from the environment at specific "hot spots" and aid to all disabled Vietnamese people, without regard to cause. About the second part of their program, Mathew Palmer, the

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<sup>46</sup> Hatfield Consultants, "Comprehensive Assessment of Dioxin" (2009).

<sup>47</sup> Embassy of the United States, "Vietnam Begins UXO Clearance to Prepare Dioxin Clean-up Effort in Danang." Last modified June 17, 2011. Accessed November 22, 2011. <http://vietnam.usembassy.gov/pro61711.html>.

<sup>49</sup> De Tran, Vietnam Reporting Project. "Agent Orange – Vietnam's Last Battle." Accessed November 1st, 2010. [www.vn-agentorange.org](http://www.vn-agentorange.org)

Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, addressed the reasoning behind this plan. He explained, "Since it is our position that there is no accepted scientific link—scientific method—by which you can identify whether a particular individual is suffering from a birth defect as a consequence or result of dioxin exposure of Agent Orange, our policy is to provide assistance to those with disabilities without regard to cause."<sup>49</sup>

The United States government accepts responsibility for the American veterans who are considered victims of Agent Orange while they will not, and cannot accept responsibility for the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange.<sup>50</sup>

### CONCLUSION:

So, in the interest of doing something for Agent Orange victims, do we need to focus on exposure and on doing something to end it? Or on epidemiological numbers, and just what might be the magnitude of this public health problem and not some other? Or should we simply look at the victims themselves? Our research brought us to a unanimous agreement that victims have a voice, and deserve to be more than characters in other narratives or numbers in a case study. It is no longer relevant who a victim is, or how many victims there are, rather, it is the people that are important, and the stories they tell about their plight. After all, the children we saw and the victims we talked to are all human beings. Their suffering is very real, no matter the cause. The question of "how this happened," to them or "who should be helped," should no longer be the forefront of the argument anymore. The issue today is how to assist these people.

But who will step forward and assist them? If the Vietnamese ask the United States to take responsibility, as they often have, they are likely going to be kept waiting.<sup>51</sup> However, assistance through clean-up efforts and compensation for

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<sup>45</sup> Mathew Palmer. "Agent Orange In Vietnam," testimony, July 15, 2010. Hearing before the Committee on House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment. Text from: Statement. Available on: FDCH Congressional Testimony. Accessed October 24, 2011. <http://lifetransition.com/Images/Testimony%20of%20Dr.%20Nguyen%20Thi%20Ngoc%20Phuong.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> Richard Stone. "Agent Orange's Bitter Harvest," *Science* 315, (2007): 176-179.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, the request by Prime Minister Dung in 2010 during a visit to Vietnam from the Veterans for Peace (VFP), in Michael Uhl, "Confronting the Legacy of Ecocide: VFP Agent Orange Delegation in Vietnam." *Against Current*, November/December (2010): 4.

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disabilities is certainly achievable, and even being practiced. The United States currently provides significant funding for dioxin-remediation and for disabled Vietnamese, and their plan is to continue to this support as part of a larger effort to improve relations with Vietnam.

Though Agent Orange is still an issue in Vietnam, the discourse about it has shifted in several ways. The issue is no longer the medium for intense accusations toward the United States; rather, it has become a more subdued political tug-of-war over what must be done, and who must take responsibility. The U.S. government has indirectly yet overtly recognized that dioxin has had adverse health effects on the Vietnamese as well as Americans, but will not take full responsibility. Instead, it has provided general assistance to those who need it. Agent Orange is a generational topic that has evolved with time.

Agent Orange expert Dr. Arnold Schechter, explained to us in an interview that the Agent Orange situation has changed, and that there is no longer any reason to worry about the numbers, nor should we worry about the precision of defining causes. Schechter explained that we are never going to have a solid epidemiological data about victims, at the least because dioxin does not last forever in the body. He went on to say that with finite money, it makes sense to do less worrying about numbers and do more to remediate or clean up Agent Orange. He explained that as of now, about 40-60 million dollars from the US is used for this "remediation," but a very small percentage (from what he understands) is used for general health care in the area. He suggests we allocate more money into health prevention in order to mitigate this issue. Dr. Schechter made it clear at the end of our conversation that the numbers simply do not matter anymore. There are greater issues to be resolved. He stated, "there are at least two sides to every story, and that the truth is often somewhere in between. How we bring all of this information together to actually determine, and not estimate, the true risks to populations exposed to these chemicals continues to remain a challenge." Schechter was emphatic that if we continue to scrutinize "victims" of Agent Orange, we will find no resolution to the issue.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Arnold Schechter, phone interview, November 10, 2011.

Dr. Tan of Peace Village in Ho Chi Minh City also expressed, and in more direct terms, the need for more medical assistance from the U.S. She began by telling us that the United States' responsibility does not change just because they are cleaning up hotspots. In fact, she noted that this clean-up effort is simply "surface work," designed to appear as if they are helping significantly. She continued to explain that it is very expensive to clean up Agent Orange hotspots, but it is America's decision. However, she believes that for those who are already suffering the health consequences of exposure, clean-up comes too late, and that it would be better to send the "remediation" money to hospitals to help victims.<sup>53</sup> This overlap of agreement between both highly-experienced scientists (like Dr. Schecter) and activists (like Dr. Tan of Peace Village and VAVA) highlights the direction that future policy to assist those suffering from Agent Orange might take.

It is clear that what was explained about Agent Orange just a decade ago is not the same story that we have reconstructed in the last year. The circumstances have shifted, and so have the narratives of suffering. Perhaps the issue of Agent Orange is being used as a political performance or a perpetual argument now; but there is no doubt that we were still moved by all of these presentations. And that we are moved because they are more than just political performances, but are about the very real suffering of human beings. From walking into a room of pain and suffering to talking to victim activists, the stories we heard and the contact we made have changed many of our questions and thoughts on Agent Orange. The face to face contact with victims of Agent Orange has done more than just answer our questions. It has left us asking more questions, it has allowed us to understand the different perspectives on the war, and most of all, it has reminded us that Agent Orange is still a lasting issue and one with a history as well as a future. It is, most importantly, an abiding political controversy with real suffering at its heart.

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<sup>53</sup> Dr. Nguyen Phuong Tan, interview, Ho Chi Minh City, December 21, 2011.

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We would like to thank Diane Fox for providing us with suggestions and unpublished manuscripts that inspired us in the development of this paper. We would also like to thank Trude Bennett and Marcelle Dougan for their assistance and Mart Stewart especially for his direction of our research. We also thank our classmates in the Western Washington University Vietnam and America study abroad course – where we were able to do the research for this paper.

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# Afterword

I would like to thank you for reading this year's edition of Occam's Razor. It has been a pleasure to read and revise these essays, to learn from these authors and share with you: Western students, faculty, and community members. As you may be aware, the purpose of Occam's Razor is to share, collaborate, and showcase excellent writing. Here on staff we believe that Western students should have the opportunity to read each other's writing. We feel that students should be recognized, that standards should be set, but most importantly that we learn from one another. As this year's Editor in Chief, I hope that I have achieved those goals and tenets.

Last year Chris Crow and I, along with our art director and graphic designer, Bradley O'Neal put this project together, without any previous experience. It was tiring but also incredibly rewarding. This year things went smoother, with the help of marketing and business students to design and to math students, along with those of us in the Humanities, we have collaborated and worked hard to bring you these essays. This project is young, but I hope that it continues to grow and garner support from students and faculty. With help from readers and supporters of this project I feel that Occam's Razor can evolve into an institution here on campus.

Please help us spread the word about the publication. Tell your professors, tell your friends and tell your classmates, if you agree with anything you have heard or read, and if you have gained anything from these authors. I hope that you have fully enjoyed this year's edition of Occam's Razor. If you would like to get involved in the project, or if you would like to submit for next year please email us at [occam.wwu@gmail.com](mailto:occam.wwu@gmail.com), or check out our Facebook.

Thank you for reading,

**Cameron Adams**

Editor in Chief







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