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Victims of Agent Orange?

The press for many years took a skeptical view of veterans and the veterans' lobby, led by the American Legion. Their demands on the public treasury were not more outrageous than those of other special interest groups, the farm lobby and the professional educators, for example. But their hawkish tendencies in foreign affairs, their "Americanism" crusades and their obsession with Communists here and abroad gave them a bad image in intellectual circles and many newsrooms.

Over the past 15 years or so, a metamorphosis has occurred. Veterans, and most especially the Vietnam cohort, are now commonly depicted in the press as "victims" of an evil or unthinking system that inflicted upon them sufferings that may never heal. Their "victimization" is seen as a collective and indiscriminate experience, affecting equally all who wore (or who now claim to have worn) a uniform during those years: the mail clerk in Saigon and the Pentagon chauffeur as well as that small minority of men who, in all modern wars, carry the burden of battle and pay its price.

Perhaps that is why little critical or analytical attention is being paid by the press these days to the prospective giveaway of untold billions of dollars in compensation to veterans for "service-connected disabilities" that may have no connection whatever with any war or term of military service. The magic words, calculated to unlock the Treasury doors, are "Agent Orange."

This is the infamous herbicide used to defoliate large areas in Vietnam. It contained minuscule amounts of dioxin, an industrial byproduct that has been described in news stories as "the deadliest chemical known to man." Its presence in a landfill on Love Canal in upstate New York inspired panic leading to the evacuation of an entire neighborhood and the permanent abandonment of scores of homes. The experience was repeated at two sites in Missouri. When Vietnam veterans or their children fell to cancer and other diseases, Agent Orange became a prime suspect.

Ombudsman

The Baltimore Evening Sun, assigned to the story its respected science writer, Jon Franklin, who had won two Pulitzer prizes for his work. As a college student he had taken part in antiwar demonstrations and in protests against Dow Chemical, a producer of both napalm and Agent Orange: "It would be, I thought, *the* story of my science-writing career. I gathered about me the righteous fervor that is the armor of the crusading reporter, and I went to work."

Months later, after countless interviews and thorough review of the scientific journals, he came to a dismaying conclusion: no medical evidence supported the dioxin horror stories. He came to another conclusion: "The Agent Orange story was a myth created by a group of Vietnam-era protesters, seized upon by Viet vets and disseminated by the press. That discovery and the more shaking discovery that my colleagues [in the press] didn't care much about the truth of the matter and had never bothered to look into the substance very deeply, changed my life." He took up a teaching career and is now the journalism dean at Oregon State University.

His medical conclusions about Agent Orange have been validated in many studies, most comprehensively in a $43 million research effort by the Centers for Disease Control. Nevertheless, the Department of Veterans Affairs, cheered on by the veterans' lobby, by dissident researchers and by politicians in Congress is opening the door, inch by inch, to Agent Orange claims that, theoretically, could extend to each of the 3.1 million men and women who served in Southeast Asia. Veterans Affairs Secretary Edward Derwinski recently awarded "service-connected" disability payments to a group of Vietnam veterans suffering from a rare form of cancer. The highest incidence of these tumors was among sea-going sailors who had not been exposed to the defoliant. Mr. Derwinski claimed no "scientific" basis for his action but explained it with a quip: "Remember, this is a kinder, gentler administration." President Bush approved.

A new study of several thousand workers exposed to dioxin in manufacturing plants is to be issued soon by the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety. If it supports the CDC studies and Mr. Franklin's researches, the "media" will have an opportunity to demythologize the subject. One might even say we would have an obligation to do so. But often we are more diligent in defining the responsibilities of others than examining our own.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR