

## The Future of Agent Orange

Speech by Charles R. Bailey  
at the  
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Dr. Trần Đoàn Lâm, thank you for your kind opening remarks. And thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for coming this afternoon to the launch of the Vietnamese edition of our book, *From Enemies to Partners- Vietnam, the U.S. and Agent Orange*.

I would like to pause here a moment to remember President Tran Dai Quang.

President Quang was known for wanting to see stronger relations between Vietnam and the U.S. In a speech in 2016 he characterized our two countries as “former enemies turned friends.” We echo his words in the title of our book, “From Enemies to Partners,” and honor his memory. Certainly I think President Quang would have agreed that the progress on Agent Orange we have seen in recent years has contributed to “former enemies turned friends.”

And today, as one measure of that progress Dr. Le Ke Son and I welcome Deputy Foreign Minister Pham Quang Vinh and Public Affairs Counselor Molly Stephenson from the American Embassy, who will speak in a moment.

Ladies and gentlemen. In 1997, the Ford Foundation asked me to move to Vietnam to head their newly opened office in Hanoi and lead a small staff and commence making grants to Vietnamese institutions in several fields. In the fall of 1998, I visited an agricultural project in the Central Highlands and saw hillsides which once had been covered with deep, ecologically rich forests, but now held just scrub vegetation. I was stunned. I was even more surprised when I returned to Hanoi and found no one here who was willing to talk about Agent Orange. The State Department had in fact instructed our embassy’s diplomats not even to use the phrase “Agent Orange.”

### So we have this problem

During the American War in Vietnam the U.S. used Agent Orange and other herbicides to defoliate forests and destroy food crops. The spraying went on for nine years. As many as 4.1 million Vietnamese may have been exposed.

Today, fifty years later, the Vietnamese are still feeling the harmful effects. Dioxin is the heart of the problem; it was a contaminant in the Agent Orange. Dioxin is associated with massive health problems for many of those who were exposed and it’s linked to birth defects among their children, grandchildren and now their great grandchildren.

So in 1998, and continuing well into the 2000s, there were different understandings and underlying antagonisms. There was no common ground—no common ground on which the two countries could join forces to move forward on this issue.

### The Breakthroughs

This situation needed to change and slowly it did change. As the Ford Foundation Representative I became deeply engaged with transforming a terrible legacy into an opportunity. The question was how to conceptualize the problem in a way that would allow everyone to come together to work on it.

We found two breakthrough concepts.

--First, focus on the dioxin hotspots. Dioxin is at levels dangerous to human health, it turns out, at just a few 'dioxin hot spots' at former American military bases. So we have focused on the three seriously contaminated airbases at Phu Cat, Da Nang and Bien Hoa.

--And second, focus on the severely disabled: It is often difficult to link disabilities young Vietnamese live with today with exposure to Agent Orange so long ago. However we can make a good beginning by focusing on the most heavily sprayed provinces and within those provinces on the most heavily, or severely, disabled people. Research we report in the book shows that people with severe deformation of their arms and legs, developmental delay and/or cognitive disability can be considered Agent Orange victims.

### And now for the Progress

Dioxin is no longer a threat to public health in communities surrounding the airports at Da Nang and Phu Cat. Health and disability projects have reached several tens of thousands of disabled Vietnamese children and young adults.

In the U.S. the leadership on dealing with Agent Orange in Vietnam has come from the Congress, with the leadership of Senator Patrick Leahy. As a result of Leahy's work, since 2007 the Congress has appropriated \$230.1 million dollars in annual appropriations for Agent Orange in Vietnam. A new appropriation expected this week will bring the total to over \$260 million.

### But there is still a Challenge

We are not done. Yes, Vietnam and the U.S. have moved "From Enemies to Partners" but we still need to perfect that partnership.

The U.S. and Vietnam need to extend health and disability projects to reach many more people, beginning with the most severely disabled in the historically heavily sprayed provinces.

And the airbase at Bien Hoa contains 400,000 cubic meters of dioxin contaminated soil which requires clean up. You can see now why Dr. Son and I wrote this book.

## The Book

The Agent Orange issue has come a long way in Washington and there is now a beginning sense that Americans do have a moral obligation to stay the course with Vietnam on Agent Orange but more champions and greater public awareness are needed in the U.S., especially among Vietnamese Americans.

In the Congress lawmakers view Agent Orange in Vietnam as both an issue of humanitarian assistance and an opportunity to turn the page on the past and establish a wholly new relationship with Vietnam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Ladies and gentlemen. The end of the disaster of Agent Orange is within the reach of people of goodwill on both sides—those in government, the two militaries and those in civilian life. Given the positive record of collaboration and partnership since 2007, it would be foolish, and indeed disgraceful, not to carry through to the completion of the task.

Trust and cooperation between former enemies are often rebuilt and fortified through the work both sides do to remediate the terrible aftermath of war. Postwar measures will never be able to erase deep scars, restore personal losses or make up for great hardship. However, if they are undertaken in good spirit and with vigor and sincerity, they can unite people on a forward path of mutual respect and friendship.

Both Vietnam and the United States want to move forward in this way together. Dr. Le Ke Son and I believe our book will be useful in ensuring that progress today continues to be progress tomorrow.

Thank you.