

United States Institute of Peace  
*Overcoming War Legacies: The Road to Reconciliation and Future Cooperation  
Between the United States and Vietnam*  
March 26, 2019

Panel 2- *Healing from the Destruction of War*  
11:00am – 12:00pm

**Charles R. Bailey, Moderator**

**Opening and Closing Remarks**

**Opening**

Good morning. In Panel 2 we will be talking about Healing from the Destruction of War-- the reality today of unexploded ordnance or UXO, and Agent Orange. Both UXO and Agent Orange significantly impact Vietnam.

I'm Charles Bailey and I'll be moderating Panel 2. You've just met our five panelists, who will speak in a moment.

During the war U.S. aircraft dropped explosive munitions over Vietnam. About 10 percent of them failed to detonate. Today they lie just below the surface awaiting accidental contact. UXO contamination affects some 18 percent of Vietnam's land area, especially in Quang Tri province. U.S. assistance with UXO clearance began in Quang Tri in 1996. The UXO casualty rate used to be 70-80 people a year. Last year it was zero. Let me repeat that: For the first time since the war ended, there were no deaths from UXO in Quang Tri province in 2018. This is a milestone that needs to be celebrated! [round of applause]

During the war U.S. aircraft sprayed Agent Orange over selected strategic areas. By the time they were done the spraying had defoliated forests and destroyed crops over 15% of the area of then South Vietnam. The Agent Orange was contaminated with dioxin, a toxic substance undetectable except by sophisticated laboratory tests. Unlike UXO, questions about what exactly had become of the dioxin and what were its impacts on people were subjects of deep disagreement between the U.S. and Vietnam for a long time.

The first breakthrough on Agent Orange was the dioxin hotspot hypothesis, that the dioxin residue from Agent Orange was concentrated in just a few places. In fact there were three dangerously contaminated dioxin hotspots at the locations where the spray planes had once been based, at Phu Cat, Da Nang and Bien Hoa.

The second breakthrough was evidence that a large majority of the victims of Agent Orange were among those Vietnamese with the most severe disabilities—especially children and young adults with malformations of the upper and lower body, mental incapacities and developmental delays.

In 2007, 32 years after the end of the war, and thanks to Senator Patrick Leahy, the governments of the U.S. and Vietnam began to address this war legacy on the ground in Vietnam. Since then, USAID's programs of health and disability assistance have reached tens of thousands of disabled Vietnamese. In 2017 the two governments completed the remediation of dioxin at the Da Nang Airport.

American veterans of the war and their families have also been affected. I'm pleased to see Bobby Muller, Ann Mills Griffiths and Fred Downs here. They have worked tirelessly to get help for American veterans and now 528,000 American veterans receive VA benefits. Thank you.

Our panelists have stories about how they got involved with these war legacies; I'll tell you mine.

In 1997 Susan Berresford, the president of the Ford Foundation, called me and said they would like me to go to Vietnam and head the Ford Foundation office in Hanoi. I would develop a program of Ford grant making in Vietnam. I said to Susan, "What do you have in mind?" She replied, "Just go there; you'll figure it out." "What's the budget?" I asked. "\$10 million a year." Wow. What's not to like about this assignment?!

So I moved to Hanoi and we proceeded to make grants in higher education, reproductive health, media, arts and culture and agricultural development—typical Ford Foundation stuff. In early 1998 though I went to Dak Lak in the Central Highlands where I saw the damage Agent Orange had caused. My 1998 Dak Lak trip grew into an 11-year program of Ford Foundation grant making to help bring the two governments into a partnership to deal with Agent Orange/dioxin. Agent Orange became an itch I just had to scratch....

UXO and dioxin today require two kinds of responses.

First, *eliminating* the future threat of UXO and dioxin by clearing away the former and cleaning up the latter;

Second, *caring* for those who have already been afflicted.

Our panelists will address both of these responses. We will then have 15 minutes for you the audience to question them. I will then sum up Panel 2.

### **Closing**

To sum up-- UXO and dioxin are a major challenge to the Vietnamese even today, even though the war ended 44 years ago.

It took a long time for the two sides to be able to find common ground and build an effective partnership to deal with these two war legacies. Today U.S. officials freely acknowledge Agent Orange and are working to build a better future with Vietnam.

In Vietnam, people like to learn from models. These are small projects on the ground which if successful demonstrate a solution to a complex problem which can then be spread to larger areas. The most famous model was created by Nguyen Van Linh, who in the 1980s experimented with free markets for farmers. His model became the basis for *đổi mới*, the restructuring of the economy which created modern Vietnam.

As a result of our partnership we now have models. They're at earlier stages than *đổi mới* but we know they work: In Quang Tri province-- how to achieve zero impact from UXO. In Da Nang-- how to safely manage the removal of dioxin from large volumes of contaminated soils. In Tay Ninh and six other provinces-- how to build sustainable programs that reach the severely disabled and transform their lives.

The victims of Agent Orange and UXO in Vietnam are a humanitarian concern, which we're doing something about. These are not just 'nice projects' though. They are fundamental to the future of the relationship between Vietnam and the U.S.

You can capture everything we've said in the past hour in just five words:

Progress;

Partnership;

A Shared Future.

Please join me in thanking our panelists!

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### Panelists

**Jerry Guilbert**, Chief of Programs, Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, U.S.  
Department of State

**Thao Griffiths**, Former Country Director, Vietnam Veterans of America

**Colonel Than Thanh Cong**, Director, Committee 701, Ministry of Defense

**Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Rinh**, President, Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange

**Chris Abrams**, Director, Environment and Social Development, USAID/ Vietnam

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