

War, Herbicides and Moral Disengagement

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And the least secret agent of all . . . Agent Orange!

On August 10, 1961, the United States, several years before it actually sent troops, started poisoning the forests and crops of Vietnam with herbicides. The purpose: to deprive our declared enemy, the commies of Ho Chi Minh, of food and ground cover that allowed them to trek from North to South. It was called, innocuously, Operation Ranch Hand.

Agent Orange, the most powerful of the herbicides used in Operation Ranch Hand, contained dioxin, one of the most toxic substances on the planet. We dropped 20 million gallons of this and other herbicides on Vietnam, contaminating 7,000 square miles of its forests. Half a century later, we are fully aware of the consequences of this strategic decision, not just for the Vietnamese, the Laotians, the Cambodians, but also for many American troops: hundreds of thousands of deaths and debilitating illnesses, horrific birth defects, unending hell.

History, in all its moral primness, has relegated our use of Agent Orange to the status of “controversial.”

Much to my amazement, I learned the other day that August 10 is now a day with official status. Numerous international organizations, many of them Vietnamese, have declared it [Agent Orange Awareness Day](#).

I say, let’s keep this awareness alive and evolving at least for the next decade, which is how long the United States continued to wage its chemical warfare on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. And they didn’t wage it in ignorant innocence. Top military leaders, whose personal lives, of course, were unaffected by Agent Orange, were fully aware of its toxicity.

This raises what I choose to call The Question from Hell: How is it possible to make such a decision — to place short-term military strategy ahead of moral restraint and compassion for civilians? And this leads to a second, larger question: Why are military and political leaders so unwilling or unable to envision the long-term consequences of their decisions, that is to say, the consequences that utterly transcend the significance of the war they’re trying to win? Why are they so indifferent? Why are they so . . . stupid?

Pondering these questions was how I spent Agent Orange Awareness Day. Whether the U.S. won or lost the war, stopped or failed to stop the communist dominoes from tipping, the landscape would still be ravaged, the infected would still be dying, newborns would still have shocking [birth defects](#) (missing limbs, extra limbs, misplaced organs and so much more).

As the [War Legacies Project](#) notes on its website, the U.S. was trying to fight an “invisible enemy” who was hiding in the jungle, living off the land, by — what’s the big deal? — killing the jungle itself. As a result: “Ever since the war’s ending, the people of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have been saddled with an invisible enemy of their own.”

To sum it up as simply as possible, war is insane — and growing ever more so. The military establishment isn’t just brutal and cruel. It is so advanced in the technology of lethality that its capable of destroying the world. Hasn’t the time come to defund war — completely! — and rethink how we deal with conflict?

Well yes, of course, but we all know this isn’t going to happen. Nonetheless, the creation of Agent Orange Awareness Day could well be a moment of human awakening, a chance for there to be a collective focus on that Question from Hell: *Why?*

Here’s a starting place, thanks to psychologist [Albert Bandura](#), as quoted by Russell P. Johnson in an essay published by the University of Chicago Divinity School. In essence, Bandura has sought an answer to the Question. What gives political leaders the wherewithal to violate basic human values — established moral standards — and perpetrate the inhumanity of war?

He calls the phenomenon of doing so “moral disengagement” and posits four forms that this behavior takes:

1. Euphemistic labeling: We may drop bombs and kill dozens or hundreds or thousands of civilians, including children, but the action is described by the lapdog media as, simply, an “airstrike.” We may torture Iraqi detainees but it’s not such a big deal when we call it “enhanced interrogation.” We may poison the jungles of Southeast Asia, but what the heck, there’s Jed Clampett leading the way in “Operation Ranch Hand.” The list of military euphemisms goes on and on and on.

2. Advantageous comparison. If the enemy you’re fighting is evil — and he always is — the actions you take to defeat him, whatever they are, are ipso facto justified. The alternative is doing nothing, a la Neville Chamberlain, appeasing Hitler. Violent response to evil — carpet-bombing Hamburg or Tokyo, nuking Hiroshima and Nagasaki — is not simply justifiable but the essence of morally necessity.

3. Displaced responsibility. I was just following orders, cries the Buchenwald guard. I did what I was told. As Johnson writes: “Decisions are made and justified without anyone ever having the sense of a moral threshold being crossed.” Indeed, “an entire society can rely on displacement of responsibility to shield themselves from moral scrutiny.” A pernicious side effect of this is known as “moral injury.” Once a soldier is out of the military, the justification for killing someone may completely vanish; the result is a high suicide rate among vets.

4. Attribution of blame. They made us do it! “One’s actions are treated as mere reactions, caused not by one’s own decisions but by the actions of the enemy,” Johnson writes. “. . . If

our actions are excessive or barbaric, it is the other side's fault for driving us to such extremes." When both sides in the conflict resort to this, which is almost always the case, Bandura calls the result "reciprocal escalation." The war gets increasingly bloody.

Agent Orange Awareness Day, as I noted, was Aug. 10. I think we should spend the rest of the year honoring War and Dehumanization Awareness Day.

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