

The Defoliation of America: Agent Orange Herbicides and the American Public

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The Vietnam War continues to attract popular and scholarly attention as its legacy plays out. This research project focuses on a herbicide mixture—most commonly known as “Agent Orange,” after the orange band storage barrels were marked with—used to defoliate the jungles in South Vietnam and control brush in the United States. It examines the experiences of scientists, health and environmental activists, veterans, as well as the Vietnamese people, in challenging the use of the herbicides and in dealing with their effects and legacies. This research examines the initial production of the chemical herbicide, its adoption for use by the United States government, spraying in Vietnam, use for domestic spraying to control timber and brush lands, and the various controversies associated with the potential hazards to humans and the natural environment, both in the United States and Vietnam. Extensive contemporary accounts, corporate records, government documents, organizational records of veterans’ groups, personal accounts of veterans, oral history interviews, and later cultural productions compose the basis of the study. The project focuses on Agent Orange activism, looking at four key groups: Western scientists, citizen activists, American veterans, and Vietnamese scientists and citizens. As such, this research offers a new perspective on the links between chemical manufacturers, the state, and war; social activism connected to the uncertain health effects of toxic chemicals; the environmental and health effects on American and Vietnamese people and ecosystems; and on policy decisions made by the US Departments of Defense and Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, and Veterans’ Administration.

The Defoliation of America: Agent Orange Herbicides and the American Public argues that the various protests against the use of one chemical compound, Agent Orange, reveal problems in democratic decision-making, and the resulting policies in both domestic and international arenas. These conflicts reflect embedded tensions between scientists, industry, government agencies, citizens, and other countries, which might be resolved through the de-centering of scientific authority while maintaining scientific expertise. The debates about Agent Orange reflected a discourse of rationality and expertise that privileged scientific actors. The disruptions caused by the various challenges made by different groups, such as life-science scientists, environmental activists, Vietnam veterans, Vietnamese scientists and citizens, expose the “hidden transcripts” of Americans and others’ understandings of science, democratic decision-making, and citizenship. This book argues that the challenges of decision-making arise from more than the general public’s ignorance of scientific process, reluctance to accept risk, or inability to assess hazards. Scientific culture, as demonstrated in the case of Agent Orange, promoted a specific world-view that contributed to

misunderstandings about herbicide safety and scientific authority. This book examines the process by which policy decisions were influenced by scientific expertise.