

Hynes/My Turn: Refusing to play the victim

Recorder, The (Greenfield, MA) - January 26, 2015

- Author/Byline: H. Patricia Hynes
- Section: Home

The Paris Peace Accords were signed on Jan. 27, 1973, making possible a re-united Vietnam. The peace accords ended eight years of the American War (as it is known to the Vietnamese) and two prior decades of covert warfare against this small, agrarian Asian country. For much of the American public, the war was a bitterly divisive issue to put behind them. With no good ending, why dwell on or learn from or lose sleep over Vietnam, unless you had lost a loved one or were a veteran haunted by its violence?

In the Paris peace negotiations, President Nixon agreed to pay Vietnam \$3.25 billion for reconstruction aid; however, he was impeached before this agreement was honored. The following two post-war presidents — Ford and Carter — refused to enforce it; and Congress then annulled the agreement. Our government then set out to punish Vietnam, working to hinder their entry into the United Nations, initiating an economic and trade embargo and blocking aid from international agencies, until 2000. Some have labeled this period of penalizing the country that defeated us, the second American War in Vietnam.

In March 2014, I traveled through Vietnam from Hanoi to Da Nang in central Vietnam to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). The purpose of my journey was to investigate the plight of third and fourth generation Agent Orange-dioxin victims; the fate of contaminated sites from the war; and what is being done to overcome the legacy of the 12 million gallons of Agent Orange our military sprayed on upland forests, coastal mangroves and villages from 1961-1971.

I visited models of community-based care for Agent Orange victims that rival our best ones for handicapped children, staffed by people who spoke of the children as their family. I found that those working to rid Agent Orange from the Vietnam environment harbor no antipathy to American citizens, while they clamor for justice from the United States government to pay for the health and environmental costs from our 10 years of chemical warfare.

Were Nixon's 1973 peace negotiations' pledge of \$3.25 billion for reconstruction honored in today's dollars, the inflation adjusted pledge of \$17 billion would support the costs of health, housing and educational services for Agent Orange victims; of ecological restoration of forests and mangroves; and of the remediation of remaining dioxin hotspots.

More than a dozen "Peace Villages" — some with organic gardens, orchards and animals — have been built for children and, in some cases, for Vietnamese veterans who have severe mental and/or physical challenges. Here, residents receive rehabilitative care and physical therapy and those able to learn are prepared for higher education or taught vocational skills, such as sewing, flower-making, fabricating incense sticks, etc. Hundreds are needed for the estimated thousands of multigenerational victims.

The Peace Villages are organized and built by the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange (VAVA) with funds from the Vietnam government and international supporters. Many staff and administrators are retired Vietnamese war veterans; and some staff are themselves physically handicapped from their parents' exposure to Agent Orange. Some pioneers in this effort to undo the ongoing harm of the Vietnam War and to heal their own spiritual wounds of war are American veterans, who raise funds for the Peace Villages, volunteer their services, and bring other American veterans to visit the peace villages, in the spirit of reconciliation.

When I asked about their striking commitment to the Peace Villages, the retired Vietnamese veterans spoke of having lost so many friends in the war that, having lived, they want to give back to war victims. One former general likened his iron-willed commitment to his country's 2,000-year-old history of success against invaders and colonizers: "We beat the Chinese, we beat the French, we beat the Americans, now I want to beat Agent Orange." A young university student working in the VAVA Ho Chi Minh City office, said quietly, "Look at me," pointing to his head shaped like a light bulb. "I hope my passion will contribute to other Agent Orange victims' happiness and freedom." A medical doctor responsible for rehabilitative care of children at the Tu Du Hospital Peace Village said, "my life is bound to the Agent Orange babies and I am passionate about their right to be treated humanely."

Like many U.S. visitors to Vietnam, I found a people who are forward-looking and forgiving; a poor country (rendered more so by the 25-year U.S. trade embargo) doggedly lifting itself out of poverty; and a country determined not to leave their victims of Agent Orange behind.

Perhaps most telling of their spirit is the response of a Vietnamese veteran when asked by U.S. veteran James Zumwalt, why Vietnamese are not bitter toward Americans. "We Vietnamese have small bodies," the vet replied. "If we fill them with hate, there is no room for love." A well of wisdom from which we Americans could draw.

H. Patricia Hynes is an environmental engineer and former professor of Environmental Health at Boston University School of Public Health. Currently she directs the Vietnam Peace Village Project in the Traprock Center for Peace and Justice. <http://traprock.org/agent-orange/>

- Record: d44bfc99ba3cd7e2be1968566b12fedb666c33
- Copyright: Copyright, 2015, The Recorder, Greenfield, MA