

Cari  
College Composition II: The Rhetoric of War  
Date  
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“We Were Not Aware”: Agent Orange,  
Propaganda, and the Manipulation of Just War Theory in Vietnam

In December 1961, fourteen pilots arrived in the Philippines. They were to be the pilots of a project that had been dubbed “Operation Ranch Hand” by the United States military. These men and their successors were to fly fixed-wing Air Force C-123s on defoliation—and beginning in 1964, crop-destruction—missions in Vietnam for the next nine years. The Ranch Hands have since been described by Air Force personnel as “unsung heroes” who “flew their obsolescent UC-123s with abandon, hurling them at times into 60 degree banks at treetop level, taking hits on virtually every mission” (Boyne 84). There is no question about the bravery of the Ranch Hand pilots; they flew head-on into danger, disregarding anti-aircraft ground fire to spray the defoliants that would strip trees of their leaves, exposing Viet Cong supply trails and bunkers to American and South Vietnamese forces and thereby saving the lives of countless troops. The Ranch Hands were following orders to the best of their ability: they knew targets, statistics, and percentages. What they didn’t know was exactly what they were spraying all over the Vietnamese countryside. Unknown to the pilots, the defoliants they used—mixtures of primarily undiluted 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T—were contaminated with a chemical which scientists have described as one of the most toxic known to man: 2,3,6,7-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin, commonly known as TCDD or dioxin. The most frequently used of these contaminated defoliants during Operation Ranch Hand was Agent Orange. It would not be until years after the sprayings had ended that investigators finally looked into what had been dismissed as Viet Cong propaganda during the war: one investigator’s informants reported that villagers suffered from skin rashes and abdominal pains after drinking from contaminated water, that pregnant women

suffered more stillbirths than usual, that small children who had been carried on their mothers' backs during a day's work developed "bad rashes all over their bodies" that eventually proved fatal, and that livestock such as goats, pigs, and chickens were killed, though large cattle sometimes survived (Wilcox 156-8). These occurrences remained the rule through the investigations of many isolated hamlets in sprayed areas. The intended consequences of the sprayings also caused suffering among the people: one former resident of a Viet Cong-dominated area that had been targeted for crop destruction stated, "All their lives, they did not own anything better than their own little plot of land, and the few trees. The spraying in one day killed the trees that had been planted fifteen or twenty years before. You see how this affects their feelings..." (Buckingham 120). Even the things most precious to the people and their livelihood suffer from the destruction of war, no matter how well justified that war may be.

Just war theory uses a series of principles to judge whether the participants of a conflict are justified in their actions. Just war theory can be divided into *jus ad bellum*—the justifications involved in entering a war—and *jus in bello*—the justifications of wartime actions. In his book *Just War: Principles and Cases*, Richard Regan delineates the two aspects of *jus in bello*, which are the principles of discrimination and proportionality. The United States' use of herbicides in Vietnam under the code name "Operation Ranch Hand" was a controversial issue, even during the war. There were those, predominantly in the Department of Defense, who believed that defoliating the countryside and spraying enemy crops were beneficial and vital to the cause of American troops sent to fight Viet Cong guerrillas. It is important to keep in mind that the Department of Defense's beliefs may have stemmed from bureaucratic propaganda of a type described by David Altheide and John Johnson in their book entitled *Bureaucratic Propaganda*. As the war drew on and the harmful effects of Ranch Hand's most commonly used herbicide,

Agent Orange, came to light, opposition began protesting more vocally and people began to investigate the circumstances of herbicide use. What ensued was a long and arduous political battle to determine who knew what and when they knew it. The transcripts of Senate oversight hearings, such as the *Oversight Hearing To Receive Testimony on Agent Orange* in 1980, contain testimonies from various organizations which are useful in revealing which parties knew a particular fact at a given time. There are also various wartime memoranda and government-sponsored reports which have since been declassified; placed in context, they provide valuable insight into the government's motives and knowledge.

Ultimately, Agent Orange was banned from use in Vietnam—but the question of whether Operation Ranch Hand was ever discriminatory or proportional remains. In this essay, I will use Regan's conceptions of just war theory and Altheide and Johnson's propaganda theory to discuss whether the United States' use of herbicides in Vietnam, as described by the memoranda and reports, was discriminating and proportional as well as how the government's official stance—in the light of later revelations during the Senate hearings—was calculated to project the image of a just warrior. As a result, we will see that the United States was neither discriminatory nor proportional in regard to Operation Ranch Hand, despite the official statements which claim that it had no knowledge of Agent Orange's harmful effects on humans and animals.

According to Regan, the principle of discrimination holds that “just warriors may directly target personnel participating in the enemy nation's wrongdoing but should not directly target other enemy nationals” (87). . . .

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Communities of Trauma: How Wives of POWs  
and MIAs Overcame Governmental Secrecy During the Vietnam War

Sybil Stockdale was an average woman whose husband, Jim, just happened to be an officer in the U.S. Navy. Along with many of his comrades, he went off to fight in Vietnam. On September 9, 1965 Sybil received the worst news of her life: her husband had been shot down while on a mission over North Vietnam and, because he was believed to be alive, was now classified as missing in action. After the initial shock and grief, Sybil felt she had come to a crossroad. In their book, *The Military Family*, Florence Kaslow and Richard Ridenour point out that “at the moment of capture POWs were plummeted from independence to complete dependence; simultaneously, the wives went from almost complete dependence to unaccustomed independence” (176). Wives, at the time, were used to having their husbands around to help them make all decisions. When their husbands were captured, however, they were forced to make choices independently. Sybil put it, she “had three choices really about her personal conduct: [she] could become an alcoholic and remove [herself] from reality; [she] could rant and rave and scream and wring [her] hands; or [she] could cope as rationally as possible with the uncertainty” (120). Sybil decided that the first two possibilities would only make her life worse in the long run, so she chose the third option. In doing so, she made the responsibility hers to accept her new independence as a necessary step. For Sybil, coping with the uncertainty included doing all she could to find her husband, make sure he was being properly treated, and bring him home safely. Sybil set these goals she set out for herself. John Archer wrote a book entitled *The Nature of Grief* in which he explains that one of the steps in the grief process is anger, and “an alternative way of resisting what is unacceptable is to fight it” (70). Sybil found

the idea that her husband was missing in action and might never return to be unacceptable to her and decided to fight.

In *Notes on Trauma and Community* Kai Erikson defines trauma and introduces the theory that trauma can cause the development of a community. His theory is that trauma changes people and estranges them from the general population; as a result they search out other people who have been changed, like them, to relate to. These groups of traumatized people, in effect, form communities. Carl Friedrich, author of *The Pathology of Politics*, discusses theories about the nature and function of governmental secrecy. He believes that although secrecy is functional and necessary most of the time in a democracy, such as the secret ballot, it can also be abused and therefore harmful to that same democracy. In their book, *In Love and War*, Sybil and Jim Stockdale discuss how they dealt with their different traumas of Jim becoming a Vietnam prisoner of war. Sybil had to deal with being alone and taking on an unprecedented independence, while Jim had to deal with torture, isolation and an unknown survival. For Sybil to handle the trauma of her husband becoming a prisoner of war, she needed to work through the grief process by building a community with other wives in similar situations as Erikson describes. Sybil was impeded, however, by the governmental secrecy surrounding the MIAs and POWs.

Finding out that her husband was missing in action caused severe emotional trauma to Sybil. In my essay, I will use the ideas posed by Erikson and Friedrich to analyze Sybil's actions after being informed her husband was missing in action. As a result, we will see that the traumatic events these women went through caused them to form community groups and take actions as a community and individually to ensure proper treatment and safe return of their husbands in accordance with the Geneva conventions. What Sybil referred to as the

government's "keep quiet policy" and other secrets surrounding the MIAs and POWs caused difficulties for these women in coping with the trauma. This contributed to the women's desire to create the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia which brought the MIA/POW situation into the public eye.

Kai Erikson defines trauma as "a blow to the tissues of the body – or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind – that results in injury or some other disturbance" (183). . . .

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