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**Edwin Martini. "Hearts, Minds, and Herbicides: The Politics of the Chemical War in Vietnam."**
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Beginning in 1961, U.S. pilots associated with "Operation Ranch Hand" sprayed nineteen million gallons of chemicals on South Vietnam, including twelve million gallons of Agent Orange. The aim was to defoliate jungle terrain that was providing cover for soldiers of the National Liberation Front (NLF) and also to eliminate food crops intended for Front soldiers. Ngo Dinh Diem, President of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), led the way in launching attacks on orchards and rice fields provisioning the enemy. When he asked Washington to help with the campaign, Secretary of State Dean Rusk was skeptical, noting that "The Government will gain the enmity of people whose crops are destroyed," only to be countered by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara who affirmed that spraying "would be a more efficient and effective means to improve manual crop eradication efforts already underway" (62). President John Kennedy endorsed the project, while also calling for a degree of oversight, and then, under President Lyndon Johnson, spraying intensified in step with the general escalation of the war. In the face of mounting criticism, President Richard Nixon suspended the use of defoliants in 1971.

According to Edwin Martini, Ranch Hand illustrates how "the United States consistently relied on military solutions to solve political problems" and underscores "the larger futility of the American War in Vietnam" (60). Military personnel sanctioned widespread spraying, and as protests multiplied they blamed "strident" (70) NLF propaganda that aroused "fear and hatred" among the people (73) and dropped cartoon leaflets featuring a "Brother Nam" who counseled angry peasants to blame the communist enemy (64-67). "Herbicide operations are in fact commonly directed at civilian crops, although the ultimate target is the VC," explained one American, who then opined that rural dwellers "fail to understand the subtleties of the program" (73). The RVN organized an indemnification procedure, but, according to a 1967 Rand Corporation report, corruption among officials assured that payments went primarily to "wealthy and well-connected landowners" (68).

Martini notes that "despite the claims made by the U.S. military to the contrary, civilian crops were regularly, intentionally targeted by the United States" (69). Some Americans insisted that villagers who complained must themselves be Viet Cong whose grievances were inspired by partisan ends. A more hard-headed faction argued that chemical warfare "tipped the scales" for villagers already "hit by bombs and mortars." Once "their crops were destroyed by chemicals, they no longer had any reason" to remain in the hamlets (72). Commanders reasoned that generating refugees would isolate Front soldiers, expose them to US/RVN firepower, and insure their defeat.[1]

General William Westmoreland remained convinced to the end that the major problem with the operation was "the lack of enough spray capacity" (77), and independent verification did not matter to generals who insisted that "while no positive evidence exists that food shortages cause specific enemy operations to be cancelled, it can be assumed that food shortages have degraded enemy capabilities" (81). To be sure, Westmoreland and the others were "simply uninterested" in hearts and minds (78). But if a genuine inquiry had been launched, plentiful evidence would have disclosed that crop destruction was indeed hurting the NLF. Some U.S. intelligence analysts suspected that when their food sources were destroyed, "the Front simply moved on to obtain crops from another location" (73). In fact there was no "other location" in a war-ravaged countryside where hungry soldiers or civilians could readily find something to eat. The suggestion that NLF access to the means of life existed in a dimension separate from the everyday world inhabited by the peasantry replicates the American insistence on what Martini rightly characterizes as "impossible distinctions between civilians and combatants" (60).

The bombing of granaries and the depredations of RVN soldiers who burned and looted food stores made it impossible for the NLF to stockpile rice and other provisions. As a last resort, Front soldiers were given leave to work part time as day laborers so that they could earn their own meal money. They bought baby chickens and ducks, paid villagers to mind them, then sold the full-grown poultry. They batched reeds to make mattresses, caught fish, and gathered firewood that could be peddled to others. They came upon paddy fields and garden plots abandoned by refugees and tried to revive them. In short, they resorted to the expedients adopted by the bulk of the rural population in order to survive.[2]

With respect to Agent Orange, Edwin Martini's article explores the differences between the State Department and the Pentagon and between the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. But the bulk of the essay offers a straightforward analysis of military

[1] This is based on a Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam report from 1966. For more documentation on the policy of "generating refugees," see David Hunt, "Dirty Wars: Counterinsurgency in Vietnam and Today," *Politics and Society* 38/1 (2011), 38-39.

[2] These details are drawn from my current work, based on Rand Corporation interviews with defectors and prisoners from the NLF in My Tho Province; references available on request.

attempts to rationalize the use of herbicides and does not deal with medical issues for the Vietnamese and Americans who were exposed to defoliants. In the early 1960s, debate over herbicide programs "was not always about health and environmental concerns" (58), an aspect that only later would come into focus as ecological consciousness rose. The U.S. official who in 1961 defended crop destruction by claiming that "the chemical agents involved are the same kind that are used by farmers against weeds" was no more obtuse than the vast bulk of the American people who at that time did not question the spraying of domestic food sources.[3]

The fact remains that aiming to starve out the rural population was no less heinous than deliberately exposing them to carcinogens. For the Vietnamese, spraying was part of an ongoing nightmare, as winds blew Agent Orange from villages that were targeted into villages that were not, tanks and antipersonnel carriers plowed up paddy fields and napalm turned orchards into piles of ashes. Anticipating a consensus that was soon to emerge among scholars, Vietnamese peasants studied the impact of spraying on plant life and reasoned that chemicals with the power to deform and destroy nature were likely to do the same to human beings. Edwin Martini deserves praise for refocusing our attention on this important and disturbing dimension of the Vietnam War.

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[3] These aspects are explored in magisterial fashion in Martini's rich and ambitious *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty*, (Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012). The comment on "weeds" comes from Robert Johnson of the National Security Council, cited in Martini, *Agent Orange*, 57. See also David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, And The Scientists Who Changed the Way We Think about The Environment* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).