

“We have the right to protect ourselves from being poisoned.”

THE PEOPLE VS. AGENT ORANGE

MEDIA CONTACTS

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SYNOPSIS

The Agent Orange catastrophe did not end with the Vietnam War. Today, the world over, a primary chemical of the toxic defoliant controls weeds in farming, forestry, parks, playgrounds... It wreaks havoc on the human genome, causing deformed births and deadly cancers.

After decades of struggle and tragic personal losses, two heroic women are leading a worldwide movement to end the plague and hold the manufacturers accountable. In France, Tran To Nga (Trahn-Toe-Nyah) is suing the American chemical industry for poisoning her in Vietnam. In America, Carol Van Strum exposes the continuing use of toxic herbicides, many still containing dioxin. Incriminating documents disappear. Activists are threatened. A helicopter technician secretly films the contamination of reservoirs, while a massive industrial cover-up continues.

ABOUT THE FILM

Four generations after the U.S. military sprayed 20 million gallons of Agent Orange and other defoliants on Vietnam, babies in both countries are still being born with deformities caused by the dioxin-contaminated herbicide. Critical hot spots of residual contamination remain around the globe from the production, use, and storage of those chemicals. Half of Agent Orange continues to be used widely today, posing lethal environmental threats on almost every continent, including vast expanses of the United States. This is an ongoing and urgent humanitarian crime for which there has been no accountability. The fatal decisions that led to the Agent Orange "ecocide" and its cover-up are the underpinnings of our film's investigation, exposing what the key players knew when they knew it, and the actions they took and continue to take to protect their lethal products. The legacy of Agent Orange is not just a cautionary tale. It is a critically pressing and pervasively ignored humanitarian issue today. Through the crafting of this character-driven investigative documentary, interweaving the personal with the political, our fundamental goal is to finally expose the heedless decisions that resulted in the ongoing Agent Orange tragedy. Meanwhile, international organizations are banding together to codify laws against "ecocide"- deliberate, widespread attacks on human health and environmental well-being. Our keynote interviewee, David Zierler, author of "Agent Orange: The Invention of Ecocide," states that the United States' spraying of dioxin-laced

herbicides over an expanse of Vietnam larger than the state of New Hampshire was the first such instance of that crime. Will it stop there or will such attacks on human health and the environment be repeated unfettered and unpunished?

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

The fatal decisions that led to the Agent Orange disaster are the underpinnings of our film's investigation. What did the key players know and when did they know it? What actions did they take or fail to take on the basis of that knowledge?

After nearly half a century of denial, while the number of Agent Orange victims has multiplied geometrically, this film is intended to prompt worldwide recognition of the crimes of the chemical industry, the needs of the victims, and of the systemic social flaws that has enabled a continuing plague of death, deformity, and suffering. We hope the film will make denial impossible and will stir action for reparations.

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It has been almost a decade since the producer/directors made the commitment to research and produce an investigative documentary that would enable its audience to gain new insight into the process that led to the deadliest use of chemicals in the history of warfare. Four of those years have been dedicated to documenting who knew what and when, filing Freedom of Information requests, following the internal communications of the chemical companies, ambassadors, Secretaries of State and Defense, the White House and the military's many branches as they engaged in the herbicidal war. Our objective has been to obtain and build a compelling narrative out of the crucial evidentiary documents.

Documents are a leitmotif. Storms, rain, and flowing surface water are a recurring visual theme that evokes the lethal dioxin run-off and dioxin contamination. Similar images tie the contamination of Vietnam and America's Pacific Northwest as helicopters spray the ancient mangrove forests of Vietnam and Oregon's majestic conifers. The scenes of the deformed and handicapped Vietnamese child victims, difficult as they are to watch and as sensitively as we try to present them, are a stark testimony to the film's core message.

We chose not to shy away from images the world might rather not see. They are indelible evidence of corporate greed and man's inhumanity to man.

This is a story with significant contemporary ramifications about how we wage war, abuse science, disregard the environment, and shirk responsibility for catastrophic mistakes and misdeeds. Through Tran To Nga's suit in the high French court and Van Strum's tireless crusade, our exceptional characters tell that story.

Although Agent Orange is a problem that dates back half a century and this is a world with terrible contemporary issues, even in the initial stages of our investigation it became evident that this might be a cautionary tale that could benefit humankind but isn't this an old problem in a world with many new ones?

To our surprise, as we were finishing the edit, we repeatedly encountered contemporary news that is integrally related to our film. Agent Orange is as relevant now as it was during the Vietnam war years.

The indiscriminate spraying of Agent Orange over a vast expanse of Vietnam is cited as the first case of "ecocide" in world history. Will it stop there or will such attacks on human health the environment be repeated unfettered and unpunished? International organizations are now bonding together to codify laws against ecocide.

We rejoiced in 2020 when the jurors of the Eugene Environmental Film Festival gave The People vs. Agent Orange their award in the late fall of 2020 saying: "*It's everything a great environmental documentary should be.*" Our old concerns are rapidly receding now as the film is finding increased contemporary relevance.

AGENT ORANGE HISTORY

Military experiments in the use of herbicides based on the components of Agent Orange began as early as the 1950's when the British sought ways to counter insurgency in the jungle areas of Indonesia. The following brief history of Agent Orange is used with the permission of the War Legacies Project and is taken in a somewhat different form from its Agent Orange Record website. <https://agentorangerecord.com/>

The chemical was Agent Orange, the occasion was the U.S. war in Vietnam. Agent Orange was a 50/50 mix of two herbicides, 2,4,5-T, which was found to be highly contaminated with Dioxin because of the high temperatures at which it was produced, and 2,4-D which contains other forms of Dioxin as well. Between 1961 and 1971, the U.S. sprayed 12 million gallons of contaminated Agent Orange and 8 million gallons of other herbicides on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—an average of 5,200 gallons a day for 3,735 days. By the end of the defoliation program, Operation Ranch Hand, in 1971, nearly 20,000 sorties had been flown. Over 7,813 square miles of upland and mangrove forests and 781 square miles of crops (an area roughly the size of New Hampshire) were destroyed. In total, more than 66,000 square miles of South Vietnam, along with large areas of Laos and parts of Cambodia, were impacted.

In the U.S. effort to fight an invisible enemy who hid in the jungles while living off the land, Agent Orange and other herbicides were used to defoliate forests and destroy cropland. The destruction left behind will not be rectified for decades to come, as much of the herbicides used in the war were up to 50 times the concentration recommended for killing plants. Two-thirds of the herbicides used were also contaminated with TCDD, a form of Dioxin—a highly toxic substance linked to at least 19 classes of cancer and other medical conditions, as well as several birth defects.

Ever since the war's ending, the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have been saddled with an invisible enemy of their own. As have those who served in Vietnam during the war, their families, and many others who were exposed to the toxic herbicides where they were manufactured, used, or stored.

The Agent Orange Record provides a comprehensive and objective examination of the most devastating defoliant used in the U.S. war in Vietnam: its toxic legacies; its impact, intended and otherwise, on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia; and its completely unintended impact on the United States. The Record also describes the efforts to repair the damage from the herbicides to land and people.

Agent Orange Record, in order to promote greater understanding, includes a repository of the most critical resources on Agent Orange in English and Vietnamese.

Agent Orange. A humanitarian cause we can do something about. We can make Agent Orange history.

THE FILMMAKERS

Alan Adelson – Co-Director, Producer, Writer

Alan Adelson works in both film and print. His film and television credits include *One Survivor Remembers*, (HBO,) 1995, European production coordinator, winner of the Best Short Documentary Oscar and three Emmy Awards; as producer, director, and writer: *Lodz Ghetto*, (PBS, Channel Four, 9 other countries) short-listed for Best Feature-Length Documentary Oscar, 1989, winner, International Film Critics Prize, 8 international film festivals; *In Bed With Ulysses*, 2012; *Two Villages in Kosovo*, 2006, (ARTE, RTE), and *Agent orange: la dernière bataille*, 2020, (ARTE). *The People vs. Agent Orange* won the Jury Award in the 2020 Eugene Environmental Film Festival. Adelson made worldwide headlines with his investigative articles in Esquire and the Wall Street Journal revealing the disappearance of enriched plutonium from a nuclear reprocessing plant.

Kate Taverna – Co-Director, Producer, Editor

Taverna edited, produced, and co-directed *In Bed with Ulysses* as well as co-directed and edited the feature-length *Lodz Ghetto*, both of which had nationwide theatrical releases. Adelson and Taverna also collaborated on *Deux Villages au Kosovo* for ARTE France and Germany, and RTE Ireland and *Agent orange: la dernière bataille* for ARTE France and Germany. Taverna has edited more than 50 films over her career: *Asylum* and *Killing in the Name* were Academy Award nominees in Best Short Documentary category in 2004 and 2011 respectively. The feature-length *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* won Best Documentary award at the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival. *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* won the Audience Award at the 2014 Boston Independent film festival, released theatrically nationwide and was translated into 22 languages and shown globally on Netflix. *Los Sures*, a film she edited in 1984, premiered at the NY Film Festival that year and was programmed for its 30th anniversary in 2014, then went on to a nationwide theatrical release. Her broadcast editing work has been seen on CBS, IFC, A&E, BBC and PBS, among others.

Véronique Bernard – Producer, Writer

Véronique Bernard is an award-winning independent non-fiction film and television producer, director, and senior executive whose experience includes WNET Culture & Arts

Documentaries, Sundance Channel Original Programming, New York Times Television, National Geographic Television, ABC News Productions, and SBS Television in Australia where she was Head of Production. Recent credits include documentary series *E2: The Economies of Being Environmentally Conscious* (PBS/Sundance, Grantham Prize for Excellence in Environmental Journalism Award of Merit 2009,) French feature doc co-production *The Man Who Invented Himself: Duane Michals* (Special Mention Prize International Festival of Film on Art FIFA 2013,) PBS series *Art in the Twenty-First Century* (2016), feature docs *Enter The Faun* (America Reframed, 2017,) *Agent orange: la dernière bataille* (ARTE, 2020,) *Chasing Childhood* (DOC NYC 2020,) *The People vs. Agent Orange* (Independent Lens, 2021,) and documentary short *Game Changer* (Tribeca Film Festival/BET, 2021.) She teaches in the Integrated Media Arts MFA program at Hunter College and is on the Board of the Documentary Producers Alliance.

TECHNICAL DETAILS:

Length 87 minutes, 2020

Languages: English, French and Vietnamese with English subtitles

WEBSITE - for further details about the film, photos, screenings, etc.:

<http://www.thepeoplevsagentorange.com>

TRAILER: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tb6LRrE86Yk>

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