

Testimony of Vietnam Veterans of America



Presented by

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BEFORE THE

**House Veterans Affairs Subcommittees
on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs and Oversight & Investigation**

REGARDING

**“Twenty Five Years After the Persian Gulf War: An Assessment of VA’s
Disability Claim Process with Respect to Gulf War Illness”**

March 15, 2016

Good morning Chairmen Abraham and Coffman, Ranking Members Titus and Kuster and distinguished Members on the Subcommittees on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs and Oversight & Investigation, House Committees on Veterans Affairs. On behalf of VVA National President John Rowan and all of our officers and members, we thank you for the opportunity for Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) to appear here today to share our views “Twenty Five Years After the Persian Gulf War: An Assessment of VA’s Disability Claim Process with Respect to Gulf War Illness” I ask that you enter our full statement in the record, and I will briefly summarize the most important points of our statement.

No doubt you are each asking yourselves the obvious question: “Since Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a single generation organization, what are you doing here? Did you get lost and wander in here?” The answer to this question is several-fold.

First, the Founding principle of VVA is “Never again shall one generation of American veterans abandon another.” We take that principle as words to live by, both individually and as an organization. The buttons you see me and some others wearing this morning, “Leave no veteran behind” is merely a shortened version of that founding principle that will fit on a button.

Second, the parallels of what the Persian Gulf War veterans have been going through in regard to Gulf War Illness is all too familiar to those of us who have had similar experiences with the VA and with DOD in regard to Agent Orange, Agent Blue, Agent White, Agent Pink, SHAD or Shipboard Hazards and Decontamination, Project 112 in all of its multiple machinations, all of it presided over by Dr. J. Clifton Spendlove, located in the arid high country at Deseret, Utah. Trying to winnow out the baloney thrown out by both the Department of Defense and VA to try and prevent us from making any progress was (and still is) just shameful.

The DOD kept (and still keeps to this day) much of the material that documented what toxins in what quantities American service members had been exposed to in the period that went at least from 1962 through 1973 classified as Secret or Top Secret. This was not done to protect the nation (al Qaeda, ISIS, and other assorted bad guys already had this information because our military gave it to the Iraqis in their war against Iran, and from there became available to the world wide networks of terrorists of various flavors).

No, this material is being kept classified to keep it from the American public and from the patriotic service members injured by one or another of a number of toxic substances. This is being done so that DOD can shirk their responsibility, as well as to avoid any liability or culpability.

It is worth noting, by the way, that the herbicide program was by 1962 part of Project 112. There were two principle purposes to the herbicide program, which were crop destruction and defoliation to deny the enemy cover. In late 1969 Kissinger had the herbicide program removed from Project 112, which was for all chemical and biological weapons programs. Kissinger did not want to go to the upcoming sessions to re-negotiate the Geneva Accords on the Rules of Warfare with the herbicides under the command of the Chemical & Biological command of the US Army.

That was when the “D” in SHAD was changed from ‘decontamination’ to “defense” so that they could claim that this was all to test defenses, and not to test offensive weapons. Similarly, there was a concerted effort from that point on to only stress herbicides was to deny the enemy cover, inasmuch as destruction of the civilian food supply was specifically outlawed under the Geneva Accords. (The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong or National Liberation Front (NLF) taxed the farmers in areas they controlled for a percentage of their civilian food supply crops in order to feed their troops.)

That level of lying by DOD went on for the next 45 years, up to this day, and we still see no sign that the lies are going to stop until both DOD and VA clean out the rat’s nest of the arrogant spinners of mendacity from both the key sections of VA, (both VHA and VBA), and from DOD.

The DOD/VA “Management of Chronic Multi-symptom Illness” is a real study in how to cloak claims that there are no physical cause(s) of Gulf War Illness, but rather symptoms that cannot be tracked to any exposures in the Gulf. In fact, however, there is clear evidence that multitudes of troops were exposed to a variety of toxins. All of that is disregarded in this little bit of clever doublespeak.

All that is missing from this so-called “clinical practice guideline” is the snake oil to wash down this pseudo-prescriptive pabulum of puerile prognostications masquerading as a serious clinical guide.

The fact is that VA has never really tried to do serious research work into the causes of Gulf War Illness. It is all too reminiscent of the lack of serious research into the long-term adverse effects of the herbicides used in Vietnam or of the organic phosphates pesticides used in the Vietnam War and in the Persian Gulf War, as well as in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars that continue to this day.

Given the fact that there are VBA policy people who think that a hack who has never published any article in a reputable peer reviewed scientific journal is the pre-eminent scientific expert on Agent Orange and other herbicides in the whole world, it should surprise no one that VA continues to drag its feet on the epidemiological studies that IOM and others have strongly recommended for year, or that there is almost no real work into looking at toxicological research looking seriously into the various toxins that our troops were exposed to during Vietnam.

The same dearth of serious scientific effort is now being perpetuated against Persian Gulf War veterans, as well as the troops who served in the current wars.

It is no wonder that 80% of all Gulf War illness claims are denied, given the science denier motif of some of the key permanent staff members in VBA. At VVA we were astonished at the sham of ensuring that in the latest IOM review of Gulf War Illness, that half of the panel, including the Chairwoman, were mental health clinicians. Is it any wonder that this bunch recommended abandoning any “hard” science investigations into the cause(s) of Gulf War Illness? The mental health clinicians on that panel may all be very good mental health clinicians, but it is the manipulation of the process by the VA that is maddening.

If you set out to make sure that you find nothing, you structure the process to find no physical cause, and you work assiduously toward ensuring you find nothing, then it should be no surprise that you indeed find nothing. That would sum up the latest IOM panel on Gulf War Illness, which has the effect of setting science on its head.

As you know, Mr. Chairman, VVA has worked very hard with Chairman Benishek and with Chairman Miller on the Toxic Exposures Research Act of 2016, which we need to enact as soon as possible this year. It will force VA to do the research it should have been doing right along regarding toxic exposures and toxic wounds. Secretary McDonald has said that he does not need any additional authority to do what HR 1769 directs him to do. That is technically true, but VA has done nothing in the way of funding serious research regarding the ionizing radiation that so dramatically affected the health of so many in the World War II generation, and those who came right behind them.

Nor has the VA funded serious research into the adverse health impact of Agent Orange and other toxins used in Vietnam. Virtually all of the useful studies utilized in the biennial reviews were from the countries of the Pacific Rim such as Japan, Taiwan, New Zealand, Australia, or from Europe.

Similarly, VA has not funded any serious work on the toxins that have affected Persian Gulf War Veterans, nor research into the toxins that affect Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. In fact, I cannot recall any useful research into toxic exposures by VA that the Congress did not specifically mandate the VA to do, and then follow up with assiduous oversight. I would point out, Mr. Chairman that I have been at this for a day or two, so that observation covers a bit of a time span.

It is not only time to pass the Toxic Exposures Act, but to utilize any and all means that will force the VA to stop wasting money and time, and get on with the business of ensuring veterans get the assistance they need, when it will still do some good.

Thank you, Chairman Coffman and Ranking Member Kuster, for this opportunity to share some of these observations of Vietnam Veterans of America with you and your distinguished colleagues. I will be pleased to answer any questions.

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Funding Statement
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The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veteran's membership organization registered as a 501(c) (19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is also appropriately registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the Senate of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

For Further Information, Contact:

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Richard F. “Rick” Weidman is Executive Director for Policy and Government Affairs on the National Staff of Vietnam Veterans of America. As such, he is the primary spokesperson for VVA in Washington. He served as a 1-A-O Army Medical Corpsman during the Vietnam War, including service with Company C, 23rd Med, AMERICAL Division, located in I Corps of Vietnam in 1969.

Mr. Weidman was part of the staff of VVA from 1979 to 1987, serving variously as Membership Service Director, Agency Liaison, and Director of Government Relations. He left VVA to serve in the Administration of Governor Mario M. Cuomo as statewide director of veterans’ employment & training (State Veterans Programs Administrator) for the New York State Department of Labor.

He has served as Consultant on Legislative Affairs to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), and served at various times on the VA Readjustment Advisory Committee, the Secretary of Labor’s Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment & Training, the President’s Committee on Employment of Persons with Disabilities - Subcommittee on Disabled Veterans, Advisory Committee on Veterans’ Entrepreneurship at the Small Business Administration, and numerous other advocacy posts. He currently serves as Chairman of the Task Force for Veterans’ Entrepreneurship, which has become the principal collective voice for veteran and disabled veteran small-business owners.

Mr. Weidman was an instructor and administrator at Johnson State College (Vermont) in the 1970s, where he was also active in community and veterans affairs. He attended Colgate University (B.A., 1967), and did graduate study at the University of Vermont.

He is married and has four children.