

**Statement**  
**Of**  
**VIETNAM VETERANS of AMERICA**



**Submitted by**

**John Rowan,  
National President/CEO**

**Before the**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**

**Regarding**

**Examining the Impact of Exposure to Toxic Chemicals on Veterans  
and the VA's Response**

**September 29, 2015**

**Attachments**

Good morning, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and other Senators on this distinguished and important committee. Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) very much appreciates the opportunity to offer our comments concerning several bills affecting veterans that are up for your consideration. Please know that VVA appreciates the efforts of this committee for the fine work you are doing on behalf of our nation's veterans and our families.

I ask that you enter our full statement in the record, and I will briefly summarize the many of the important points of our statement.

**S. 901, Toxic Exposure Research Act of 2015, introduced by Senator Jerry Moran (KS),** and cosponsored by Richard Blumenthal (CT), would establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs a national center for research on the diagnosis and treatment of health conditions of the descendants of veterans exposed to toxic substances during service in the Armed Forces that are related to that exposure, to establish an advisory board on such health conditions, and for other purposes.

Among the invisible wounds of war are those brought home by troops, some of which may not manifest for years or even decades after the toxic exposure(s) while in military service to America. Most tragically, they may also pass on the effects of these toxic wounds to their progeny. No one can argue that our children and grandchildren should have these burdens visited on them. S. 901 is a multi-generational, multi-exposure bill. It provides a common vehicle for evaluating potential transgenerational effects of toxic exposures, from Camp Lejeune and Fort McClellan to Agent Orange in multiple locations, to the toxic plumes that sickened thousands of Gulf War veterans.

Toxins, such as TCDD and 2,4D dioxin, are believed to cause birth defects in children of military personnel who came into contact with these toxins – in-country troops during the Vietnam War, as well as the several thousand Reservists who rode in and maintained aircraft that had been used to transport the toxins. Because the various herbicides used in Vietnam were generally mixed with kerosene or JP-4 or an admixture of these two petroleum products so that they would cling to leaves better, the toxins became suspended at or near the surface as run-off in streams then into rivers and ultimately the South China Sea. For this reason, these chemicals were taken in by the desalination units on Navy ships to make potable water for the ship's boilers and other purposes. The desalinization units had the perverse effect of concentrating the dioxin up to 30 times over. Navy personnel who served off the coast of Vietnam were exposed in this manner to even greater concentrations of these toxins than some of the ground personnel.

For Gulf War veterans, the exposure was to chemical weapons in Iraqi ammo dumps containing chemical and biological agents that were blown up by U.S. Forces at the end of the Gulf War; pesticides and burn pit smoke and possibly tainted vaccines and medicines ingested by troops in Afghanistan and Iraq may also have proved toxic.

This is a simple and straightforward proposal that will begin to address the needs of the progeny of every generation of veterans, because the health conditions seen in some are so heartbreaking to so many families who wonder, “Did my service cause my children (grandchildren) to suffer? “

(Please see “Faces of Agent Orange” at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Faces-of-Agent-Orange/187669911280144>)

### **VVA unequivocally supports S.901.**

Vietnam Veterans of America applauds the leadership of Senator Jerry Moran (KS), working with his colleague Senator Dick Blumenthal (CT), to construct and introduce this bipartisan bill to begin to properly address the situations outlined above.

Let me address a few important issues within this legislation:

First, the National Center envisioned in this bill belongs in the Department of Veterans Affairs. Doctrine, law, and precedent all dictate that, since the time of Abraham Lincoln, the concerns of veterans and their progeny are vested in this department. This Center for Excellence is a small entity that will functionally manage the activities to assist the Advisory Board in overseeing research.

Second, we agree with VA testimony earlier this year that the VA lacks the internal capability, capacity, and experience in the intergenerational research that will be required. The Advisory Board provides the VA Secretary with knowledge and scientific expertise to obtain research required by the legislation.

Third, we believe that the VA does have the capability, capacity, and experience to contract with any number of governmental, quasi-governmental, academic, scientific, or non-profit research organizations skilled in the research and administration outlined in the legislation; and further, such organizations would be able to achieve the intent of the legislation in a timely and cost-efficient way.

Fourth, the legislation gives the VA Secretary a strong, independent Advisory Board – of unpaid professionals – to provide diverse perspectives and technical expertise, assuring that the VA is provided with research-based outcomes that are respected and acknowledged by the military, our veterans and their descendants, and the scientific communities.

While VVA's exploration into the health complications of veterans exposed to toxic substances during their service has centered on the families of Vietnam veterans, the veterans of more recent wars also report health issues in their children. For this reason, VVA is calling for more research on the generational legacy of toxic exposures for all veterans who have been exposed while serving in the armed forces.

The Toxic Exposure Research Act of 2015, embodied in S. 901 and H.R. 1769, does just that. This Act directs the Secretary of the VA to select one VA Medical Center to serve as the National Center for the research and diagnosis into health conditions of descendants of individuals exposed to toxic substances while serving in the Armed Forces.

The Toxic Exposure Research Act now has 18 bi-partisan co-sponsors in the Senate and 97 bi-partisan cosponsors in the House. The Act also has significant support in the community. The support from the military and veterans community has been overwhelming. Both the Military Coalition (representing 31 military and veterans groups) and the National Military and Veterans Alliance (representing 32 military and veterans groups) have publicly endorsed the Act. The National Association of Counties passed a Resolution supporting the Act, as did the National Association of County Executives. The National Federation of Republican Women also recently passed a Resolution supporting this Act. (Please see the appendices to this statement.)

VVA agrees with VA testimony before the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health on April 23, 2015, that this bill will be funded from the Research & Development line item of funding already accorded to VA. Frankly, the VA and the Department of Defense should have been funding good research in this area for the last forty years, so it is only fitting that part of this appropriation go to the Center of Excellence and to promising research proposals from within or without of the VA that will move us toward better understanding of the effects of these toxins or combinations of same.

It is time that the Congress takes this meaningful step toward justice for every generation's progeny. It is our hope that this legislation will be passed in 2015 so that the research can begin, and science can provide the answers so desperately needed by our veterans and their families.

**S.681 - Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2015, introduced by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (NY)** - This legislation would restore presumptive coverage for service-connected ills that afflict thousands of naval personnel who served in the Vietnam theatre of operations – coverage that the Department of Veterans Affairs abruptly ended in March 2002.

As noted on page 2 of this statement there is now no longer doubt of how the Navy personnel were exposed. Those who claim the toxin in the waters could not get out as far as the aircraft carriers should take a look at all of the highly radioactive debris from the Nuclear plant disaster in Japan that is now washing up on the western shores of the United States, having been carried more than 3,000 miles by the ocean currents

During the Vietnam War, some 20 million gallons of "Agent Orange" and other toxic substances was sprayed to remove jungle foliage around fire bases and to deny the enemy the ability to grow or harvest crops. Toxic chemicals in these herbicides have been linked to several afflictions, including non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, various cancers, Type II diabetes, and Parkinson's disease. The Agent Orange Act of 1991 empowered the VA Secretary to declare certain illnesses presumptive to exposure to Agent Orange, enabling veterans who served in Southeast Asia to receive health care and disability compensation for such health conditions.

In March 2002, however, the VA ceased awarding benefits to any of the 534,300 so-called blue water veterans, limiting those eligible under provisions of the Agent Orange Act only to "boots on the ground" Vietnam veterans.

Blue water veterans afflicted with any of the presumptive service-connected maladies that the VA acknowledges to be associated with exposure to Agent Orange ought not be excluded from receiving healthcare services and disability compensation for which their boots-on-the-ground brother and sister veterans are eligible. They, too, served honorably and well, and S.681 introduced by Senator Gillibrand, will accord them benefits that they have earned.

VVA fully supports S.681.

## **Camp Lejeune**

When President Obama signed into law in early August a bill 2012 enabling the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide health benefits to veterans and families diagnosed with diseases related to water contamination at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, thanks in no small part to the energy and passion of Senator Richard Burr (NC), it culminated a more than fifteen-year struggle by families who believed something toxic at Lejeune had been behind the maladies that had taken the health—and the lives—of their loved ones.

“I think all Americans feel we have a moral, sacred duty toward our men and women in uniform,” President Obama said before signing the Honoring America’s Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012 in the Oval Office. The law covers those with conditions linked to water contamination that occurred at Camp Lejeune between 1957 and 1987.

The military is a collection of very dangerous occupations beyond the obvious of hostile fire from our Nation’s enemies. Therefore VA should operate as an occupational health care system that researches and diagnoses and treats maladies, illnesses, and conditions that may result from events or exposures that may have occurred during the veteran’s military service.

VVA thanks you for the opportunity to share our views on the vitally needed legislation that you are considering today. I will be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

**NATIONAL PRESIDENT**

John Rowan was reelected to a sixth term as National President of Vietnam Veterans of America at the organization's 17th National Convention in Springfield, Illinois. First elected to VVA's highest office in 2005, Rowan has remained active with VVA since the organization's inception in 1978. A founding member and the first president of VVA Chapter 32 in Queens, New York, he has served as the chairman of VVA's Conference of State Council Presidents, for three terms on the organization's Board of Directors, and as president of VVA's New York State Council.

Rowan, who enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in 1965, went to language school, where he learned Indonesian and Vietnamese. He served as a linguist in the U.S. Air Force's 6990 Security Squadron in Vietnam and at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, providing the Strategic Air Command with intelligence on North Vietnam's SAM sites to protect their bombing missions.

After his honorable discharge from the Air Force, Rowan received a BA in political science from Queens College and a Master's degree in urban affairs from Hunter College. Rowan retired from city service as an investigator with the City of New York's Comptroller's Office. Prior to his election as National President, Rowan served as a VVA veterans' service representative in New York City. He lives in Middle Village, New York, with his wife, Mariann.

## **VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA**

### **Funding Statement**

**September 29, 2015**

The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans' 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 House 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:

Executive Director of Policy and Government Affairs  
Vietnam Veterans of America  
(301) 585-4000, extension 127



## ATTACHMENTS

### **Groups in Support of H.R.1759 & S. 901**



National Association  
of Counties Resolutio

National Association of Counties

County Executives of America

The American Legion

Rolling Thunder

National Federation of Republican Woman

States passing resolutions: New York, Kansas, Oklahoma, and California



150527 Toxic  
Exposure letterhead (

The National Military and Veterans Alliance:

- American Logistics Association
- American Military Retirees Association
- American Military Society
- American Retirees Association
- American WWII Orphans Network
- AMVETS (American Veterans)
- Armed Forces Marketing Council
- Army Navy Union
- Association of the United States Navy
- Catholic War Veterans
- Gold Star Wives of America
- Japanese American Veterans Association
- Korean War Veterans Foundation
- Legion of Valor
- Military Order of the Purple Heart
- Military Order of Foreign Wars
- Military Order of the World Wars
- National Association for Uniformed Services
- National Defense Committee
- National Gulf War Resource Center
- Naval Enlisted Reserve Association
- Reserve Enlisted Association
- Reserve Officers Association
- Society of Military Widows
- The Retired Enlisted Association
- The Flag and General Officers' Network
- TREA Senior Citizen League
- Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors
- Uniformed Services Disabled Retirees

- Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States
- Veterans of Modern Warfare
- Vietnam Veterans of America

### The Military Coalition:



TMC Letter TOXIC  
EXPOS. Research Ctr

- Air Force Association (AFA)
- Air Force Sergeants Association (AFSA)
- Air Force Women Officers Associated (AFWOA)
- AMVETS (American Veterans)
- Army Aviation Association of America (AAAA)
- AMSUS, the Society of Federal Health Professionals
- Association of the United States Army (AUSA)
- Association of the United States Navy (AUSN)
- Commissioned Officers Association (COA) of the United States Public Health Service, Inc.
- CWOA, US Coast Guard
- Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States (EANGUS)
- Fleet Reserve Association (FRA)
- Gold Star Wives of America (GSW)
- Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America (JWV)
- Marine Corps League (MCL)
- Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
- Marine Corps Reserve Association (MCRA)
- Military Chaplains Association of the United States of America (MCA)
- Military Officers Association of America (MOAA)
- Military Order of the Purple Heart
- National Association for Uniformed Services (NAUS)
- National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS)
- National Military Family Association (NMFA)
- Naval Enlisted Reserve Association (NERA)
- Non Commissioned Officers Association (NCOA)
- Reserve Officers Association (ROA)
- The Retired Enlisted Association (TREA)
- United States Army Warrant Officers Association (USAWOA)
- USCG Chief Petty Officers Association (CPOA)
- Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)
- Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA)