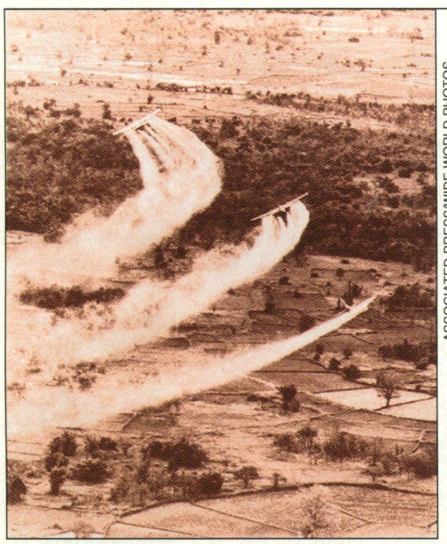
edited by RICHARD STONE



ASSOCIATED PRESS/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

The dioxin fields. Vietnamese exposed to Agent Orange sprayed during the war may become the focus of joint U.S.–Vietnamese research.

U.S., Vietnam Joint Force on Agent Orange?

Spurred by a retired admiral who ordered the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, a team of Western scientists will travel to Vietnam next month to explore the feasibility of conducting the first U.S.-sponsored research with Vietnamese scientists on Agent Orange's health effects.

Five years ago Admiral Elmo Zumwalt Jr. wrote a report accusing the U.S. government of ignoring a link between cancer in veterans and their exposure to Agent Orange, a defoliant contaminated with dioxin. In 1993, a National Academy of Sciences panel agreed in part with Zumwalt, finding "sufficient evidence of an association" between Agent Orange exposure and three cancers—soft tissue sarcoma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and Hodgkin's disease.

But the panel was unable to verify a link to other cancers or problems such as birth defects and immune disorders. So Zumwalt (whose eldest son, also a Vietnam veteran, died of cancer in 1988) continued pressing his case with Congress, managing to persuade it last year to direct the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) to explore ties with Vietnam.

NIEHS intends to do just that. An 11-scientist team from NIEHS, the World Health Organization, the International Agency for Cancer Research in Lyon, France, and other agencies will spend a week in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City listening to some 30 Vietnamese scientists explain their labs' capabilities and findings thus far. The U.S. team is keenly interested in potential studies on Vietnamese villagers, some of whom may have been exposed to far higher levels of Agent Orange than U.S. veterans, says NIEHS computational biologist Christopher Portier, who's helping organize the trip.

Vietnamese officials are "anxious to cooperate," says Zumwalt, who met with several in Hanoi last September. NIEHS Director Kenneth Olden may decide after next month's trip whether to fund this project through the extramural research program.

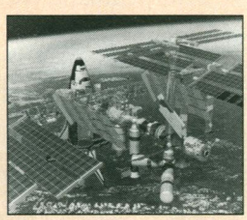
New U.K. Science Aide

John Horam, an economist and former journalist, has been appointed as Britain's new junior science minister. He succeeds Robert Hughes, who resigned earlier this month after disclosing a former love affair. Hughes's quiet departure is the 19th ministerial resignation since the present government was elected in 1992. Horam, age 56, becomes Parliamentary Secretary for the Office of Public Service and Science, the supporting role to Science Minister David Hunt.

Space Station Catches Eye of Newt

Immersed in battles over welfare, school lunches, and his book deal, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R–GA) has had little time to think about the U.S. space program. But now Gingrich and his point man for science, Representative Robert Walker (R–PA), are joining the chorus of U.S. voices urging European politicians to make up their mind on how—or whether—they will participate in building and operating the space station.

"The Republican-controlled Congress places full U.S. funding of the international space station program high on the new agenda," Gingrich and Walker wrote in a 27 February letter to European lawmakers. While recognizing "political and funding pressures" on both sides of the Atlantic, the congressmen urged the Europeans "to make your decisions as quickly as possible ... to assure that Europe shares fully in the program's benefits." Although aimed at Europe, the letter sends a strong message to members of the U.S. Congress who have opposed the $30 billion program, mostly Democrats.



FRASSANITO/NASA

Meanwhile, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) managers are biting their nails about the contributions expected from other countries. U.S. officials are especially nervous about the European Space Agency's (ESA's) move to put off a decision on the extent of their participation in the station. European officials say they have no choice, given upcoming French elections that could alter France's willingness to contribute to the program.

Last week, NASA chief Dan Goldin met with his ESA counterpart, Jean-Marie Luton, to discuss the stalemate. Afterward, Goldin announced he had agreed to set a cap on the annual cost of operating the station—a major sticking point for the Europeans, who have said they are afraid of unforeseen rises in their portion of the operating costs. But Goldin and Luton did not agree on what that cap should be, setting the stage for more negotiations. NASA now expects to finish building the space station in 2002.

Senate Backs R&D Partnerships

The Senate has declared itself a friend of government-industry research partnerships, both military and civilian. Last week it came to the aid of the Pentagon's $502 million Technology Reinvestment Program (TRP) by rejecting, in a bipartisan 77–22 vote, an amendment to a pending military spending bill that would have matched the House's decision to eliminate the program. But TRP would shrink to $302 million in the Senate version, and similar programs must still survive a final Senate vote and a conference to reconcile differences in the two bills.

Floor debate in the Senate on 7 March was a veritable paean to government-industry partnerships. After rejecting the bid to ax TRP, the Senate passed a nonbinding resolution stating that such partnerships are "increasingly important" and should "become the norm for conducting applied research by the Department of Defense." A few hours later, the senators restored $75 million from a $107 million cut voted by the House in the $431 million Advanced Technology Program (ATP) at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST).

University and industry officials applauded the legislative hat trick. But victory depends on the resolution of three issues: 1) How much more to spend on military readiness—levels range from $1.9 billion in the Senate to $3.2 billion in the House, with a presidential request of $2.6 billion; 2) Whether the rest of the defense budget should swallow the added costs; and 3) How much to take from civilian programs—such as ATP—to cushion the blow or reduce the deficit.

In the meantime, ATP officials are sifting through 252 proposals for awards to be made this summer. "It's business as usual," says Deputy Director John Gudas, adding that "we may have to raise the quality bar a little" if ATP's budget shrinks.