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Interview  
Admiral Elmo Zumwalt  
July 26, 1999

ADM's Moon Callison interviews  
the former Chief of Naval Operations,  
for "*Environmental Impact of War*"

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** During the Vietnam war from 1968 - 1970 I was commander of U.S. Navel forces in Vietnam. For the following four years I was Chief of Naval operations and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

**CALLISON:** I had heard that you were, at some point, in charge of ordering the use of Agent Orange. Can you explain what the purpose of Agent Orange was?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** The U.S. Army began using Agent Orange in about 1965 to defoliate those jungle areas where they were taking heavy casualties. In 1968, when I took command of the Brown Water Navy and moved our 1000 small craft out of the ocean and major rivers and into the narrow rivers and canals along the Cambodian boarder, we began to take casualties at the rate of 6% a month, which meant the average young man would have about a 70% probability of being killed or wounded during his years' tour.

With the Army informing that they had seen no harmful effects on humans except for the occasional skin problems, and with the Pentagon's assurance that there were no human affects, I then ordered the use along those narrow rivers and canals to defoliate. And we reduced the casualties to less than 1% a month.

**CALLISON:** What exactly happens when you used Agent Orange? How did it affect the foliage?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** Agent Orange, rather quickly, kills the leaves and leaves just dead looking trees, and also kills the weeds and grasses in which the enemy was hiding.

**CALLISON:** You said fairly quickly, how long do you mean?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** A matter of days.

**CALLISON:** When you were spraying along the rivers, you said canals?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** The narrow rivers and canals that run several hundred miles along the Cambodian border.

**CALLISON:** Did that get in the water? Was there any affect on the marine life or was it specific to foliage?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** Agent Orange was sprayed by Air Force Ranch Hand aircraft and therefore that spray of Agent Orange not only hit the foliage but also hit the water and populations living on those narrow rivers and canals and our boat people. At the time we of course did not know this would lead to rather permanent poisoning of the areas. Recent studies show that Agent Orange still remains in sprayed areas these many years after the use of it.

**CALLISON:** Did Agent Orange affect the agricultural land? Did it get into the crops? And if so, does it still show up in tests or has it dispersed and gone away?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** The Navy did not use Agent Orange in agricultural lands. There may have been some little plots along those narrow rivers and canals that were affected. The Air Force did spray some agricultural areas that were under enemy control to deny them the use of crops that they had planted in their hideaways and outposts in the mountains particularly in Tucour. We now know from recent studies done by Halifax Associates, a Canadian firm, from tests that they made, there is evidence of dioxin contamination in growth in those areas that were sprayed and in animals.

**CALLISON:** When you returned to Vietnam and saw some of the areas that had been sprayed, what did it look like?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** When I returned to Vietnam in September of 1994, at my request I was taken by the Vietnamese officials to see two areas that had been sprayed that were agricultural and they were barren of trees and agricultural products but were filled with a weed-like grass which the Vietnamese had dubbed "American Grass."

**CALLISON:** Have the jungles come back or do they look the same as the agricultural land?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** It's my understanding that in some areas trees have returned. I don't have first hand knowledge of that. And in others it has not. I suppose it has to do with the extent of the dioxin contamination.

**CALLISON:** You have mentioned that you were very much involved in getting the U.S. to pay benefits to veterans exposed to Agent Orange. What made you get involved in this action?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** In 1989 the then Secretary of Affairs, Edward Durinsky, having watched my battle with my son, our effort to help him recover from exposure to Agent Orange and cancers, asked me if I would serve as a pro bono special assistant and go through all of the documents so that I could give him a recommendation as to what he should do. The law giving him the responsibility to make a judgement, to compensate for health affects if the evidence was, proved it was likely as not that there were correlations between exposure and specific diseases.

I spent about nine months doing that and turned in a study that pointed that there were very badly flawed studies done by the chemical corporations which had been used for years as a so called reference study to denigrate very good scientific studies done by Swedish scientists. I recommended that those flawed studies be disregarded and that if one did that that there were, in my judgement, assisted by scientific advisors, 28 diseases that were as likely as not a result of exposure to Agent Orange.

We found and reported in that report that the Bureau of the Budget had ordered all the agencies of government in essence not to find a correlation between Agent Orange and health affects stating that it would be most unfortunate for two reasons: A) the cost of supporting the veterans and B) the court liability to which corporations would be exposed.

To his great credit, President Bush, faced with this report immediately ordered compensation to be provided for the first three diseases and supported the execution by the Congress of my recommendation that the flawed scientific committee advising the Secretary of Energy be disestablished and the responsibility was given to the National Academy of Science to report every two years the state of the science. This over time, has led to a total of 13 diseases to being compensated. And if I live we'll get to 28.

**CALLISON:** When you were doing your research, did you look into the health of the people in the areas that were sprayed or did you focus on the veterans?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** It was focused exclusively on the veterans because we just didn't have adequate data, although I did refer to the fact that studies by Dr. Schecter did confirm that dioxin did remain in the Vietnam area. We've been doing quite a bit to get such work started and have some now after great reluctance on the part of the Vietnamese for many years.

**CALLISON:** Knowing what you do know, would you still use Agent Orange? Were the loss of casualties enough to warrant the use of Agent Orange?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** It's my understanding that we now have defoliants that are not carcinogenic and obviously one would use those instead. Faced with what we had at the time, had I known of these long term affects, I would still have used it because we saved literally thousands at the long term cost of several hundreds being affected by it.

**CALLISON:** Going back to your return visit to Vietnam, did you see other evidence, besides defoliation, of the war in Vietnam?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** I did not. However, as I said, the studies done by the Halifax Associates do show continuing evidence.

**CALLISON:** Shifting gears a here a little. What is your interest in the Gulf War?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** When the Gulf War began I called the Secretary of Defense and recommended very strongly that positions each day be recorded and I was assured that would be done; the positions of our people. Regrettably it was not done.

I therefore, after the war, because of my knowledge of how the government had prostituted the process at the time of the Vietnam war, my responsibility to keep in touch with both White House officials and Pentagon officials, to make sure that we were going to do it right this time. I think because of that contact, the President decided to have me be a member of the Special Oversight Board which was created in part as a result of the recommendation of an earlier Presidential Advisory Committee and some concern of the nature of the work going on in the Pentagon.

**CALLISON:** What events and concerns have led up to these Public hearings that the oversight board is overseeing?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** The creation of the Special Oversight Board was, in my judgement, the result of the President's desire after he received the recommendations of this earlier Presidential Advisory Committee, to make sure that no stone was left unturned in regard to ensuring that every aspect of what might have occurred was examined. I think it was a very worth thing to do. We will report directly to the President the out come of our conclusions and make our recommendations. And that work is on-going at the present time.

**CALLISON:** When you say no stone left unturned, what exactly does that mean?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** The reason for saying that no stone should be left unturned is that there are many possibilities of what might have happened. All of them need to be researched and examination of the possibility of synergistic effects of a group of such exposures needs to be researched. And the job of the Special Oversight Board is to make sure that all of this work is on-going and in an objective fashion.

**CALLISON:** When you say exposures, are you referring to depleted uranium, oil fires, that type of stuff?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** Exposures that are being examined range all the way from the oil fires, to the use of depleted uranium in our shells and projectiles, to the shots that our people were given and the sort of individual actions that were taken by our soldiers in using Deet and other kinds of insect repellents that were not specifically authorized.

**CALLISON:** Shifting again to Kosovo, I've heard reports from the Serbian media that NATO bombing has created severe environmental damages. Do you have an opinion as to whether that is wartime propaganda or if it's justified?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** I would not believe any of the Serbian propaganda. They are under the control of a dictator whose concept of the truth is his present desire projected backward.

**CALLISON:** Do you think there is a possibility of health problems? In Kuwait there was the oil fires and depleted uranium and in Kosovo we have the burning of oil refineries and chemical plants and minimal use of depleted uranium. Do you think that could cause a public health concern down the line?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** There are undoubtedly the possibility of health concerns as a result of the military action that was taken against the Serbian forces in Kosovo. These are the kinds of consequences that have to be evaluated whenever one contemplates military action and it is the reason why a policy decision to initiate military action must be done with solemnity and care and the judgement must be made that the overriding need for the military action exceeds the possibility of the consequent health affects.

**CALLISON:** How would you decide that the need is important enough?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** Well, I think the fact that in the case of Kosovo, there were up to a million people who faced extinction or expulsion and that murder and raping was going on to a significant extent, made the need for military action to save lives, far greater than the consequential circumstances that other lives would face from the military action that was taken.

**CALLISON:** Do you think that in the future military action will be either prevented or halted or some how taken in a different manner out of concern or public health or environmental consequences?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** If we ever achieve a useful, functioning, system of government that interlocks all nations in such a way that action can be taken by a majority of nations against such repulsive individuals as Milosevic in Yugoslavia, we may be able to avoid the unilateral military actions or the actions by regional groups. Even in that far off stage, the illusion of human political relations some kind of police force would have to be taking action against the human beings like Milosevic who resort to murder and pillage.

**CALLISON:** Protocol One and ENMOD were direct results of the way the Vietnam war was fought. I interviewed Jay Austin from the Environmental Law Institute and he seemed to think that the military tries to go one step further than current policy on environmental considerations. Do you have a sense of that?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** I do not believe that the military ever go beyond the strict policy guidance they are given by civilian authority. There was a day when that was the case. When Admiral Dewey was instructed to seize the Philippines and destroy the Spanish fleet he cut the cables to Hong Kong so he would have no further instructions and was able to proceed to get the job done in 24 hours after he arrived there.

But now days, almost the reverse is true, the military are so greatly restrained that wars last longer and won less efficiently than they would otherwise be. The most notable example of that being in Vietnam where the war could have been won and lost by the constraints imposed by civilian authority.

**CALLISON:** What is your opinion of how Kosovo was fought. Was the air campaign an effective way to fight a war?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** I believe, first, that it was necessary to take action against Kosovo, and second that the only way it was possible to achieve a NATO support, unified support from all members of NATO, or remarkable support, was to agree not to use ground forces. It would have been more efficient and quicker and less casualties to the Albanian population had ground forces been used, but I think it was politically not possible because we certainly had to have the NATO concurrence. I think that that decision, to take air power in use only, then was carried out in a way that avoided a single military casualty, we lost two in operational training , but none in the action. So, I think that was to the great credit of the way the operation was carried out.

**CALLISON:** Do you think the United States should be involved in cleanup after war? I have heard that in Vietnam we weren't invited back to do cleanup and I know that in Kuwait the Allies had done some cleanup of the desert. What about Kosovo? Is there an obligation on our part and on NATO's part to help cleanup?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** In the case of Vietnam there was initially no obligation to participate in cleanup nor any possibility of doing so because the communist forces won and wanted nothing at that time, to do with U.S. help.

With regard to Kuwait, our actions there, to help the Kuwaitis cleanup their mess largely at their expense, was an appropriate thing to do. They were our ally and had been invaded and badly brutalized.

With regard to Kosovo, I think that NATO has clear responsibility to assist in straightening out the damage there. But I would be very much opposed in helping Serbia itself until Milosevic has been dispatched to the lower world.

**CALLISON:** What about the use of depleted uranium in Kosovo.

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** With regard to depleted uranium, the Presidential Oversight Board is studying the research that has been done on that matter and has not yet taken an official public position and for that reason I reserve a comment at this time.

**CALLISON:** Do you want to add anything?

**ADM. ZUMWALT:** ...innocent people and our capability to do that has improved so remarkably, the Desert Storm War was so much more efficiently used because of the accuracy of our weapons than in Vietnam, and the recent action in Kosovo was an order of magnitude better than Desert Storm because of the continued improvement in the accuracy and control mechanisms of our munitions.