

September 12, 2018

Chairman Johnny Isakson
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Washington DC 20510

Ranking Member Ion Tester
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Washington DC 20510

Dear Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Tester:

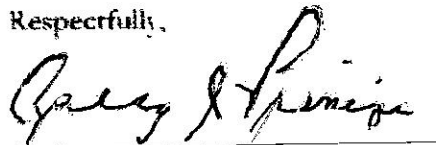
As former Secretaries of the Department of Veterans Affairs, we write to you to express our concerns with H.R. 299, a bill that includes provisions to expand Agent Orange presumptive status to the crews of ships that were deployed to and operated in the ocean waters off the coast of the Republic of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

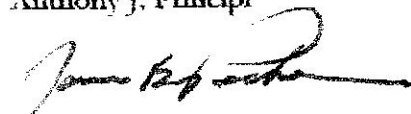
H.R. 299 is based on what we believe to be inconclusive scientific evidence to verify that these crews' experienced exposure to Agent Orange while their vessels were underway. The distance these ships routinely operated from shore was so great that any residue of Agent Orange drifting out from land to the sea would have been diluted to such an extent it would have posed a negligible to nonexistent hazard to human health, irrespective of the technical means those ships used to purify non-potable water for shipboard use.

Throughout each of our tenures as Secretary of Veterans Affairs we understood the importance of caring for the men and women who served our nation during the Vietnam War and who may have been exposed to toxic substances. Our decisions were based on the findings of the National Academy of Sciences that scientific evidence showed an association between certain illnesses and exposure to dioxin. On this issue, the 2011 Institute of Medicine report, Blue Water Navy Veterans and Agent Orange Exposure, concluded with "The committee's judgment is that exposure of Blue Water Navy Vietnam veterans to Agent Orange-associated TCDD cannot reasonably be determined". We urge the Committee to defer action on H.R. 299 until such a study is completed and scientific evidence is established to expand presumptions to those at sea.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,


Anthony J. Principi


James Peake


R. James Nicholson


Robert McDonald