

How did Monsanto come to be the Devil in the GMO debate?

Which is the real Monsanto? The one poisoning the world and failing to improve crops with genetically modified seeds, or the mega-successful company with the top science officer extolled for helping to make agriculture more productive, resilient, and cost-effective? How can one company be so reviled and lauded at the same time?

Something has to power that kind of visceral reaction. What it seems to be is a complicated brew of Monsanto's legacy as a company that once produced chemicals such as Agent Orange, the defoliant notoriously used in the Vietnam War; its perceived thuggish (and litigious) behavior towards small farmers who have violated seed technology contracts; and assorted, widely held myths, such as the one about the "failure" of Monsanto's genetically modified cotton that caused at least 250,000 Indian farmers to commit suicide over the past decade. A big part of the company's demonization surely owes to its huge commercial success, which has made it the face of a relatively new science that is poorly understood by the general public and viewed suspiciously by many. If you add all those ingredients together, you have what is known as a toxic brand.

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