GREEN AGENCY VERSUS AGENT ORANGE:
Vietnam, Ecocide, and Environmental Activism at Middlebury and Beyond

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Benjamin D. Harris
Introduction

In 1968, as the U.S. unleashed 100,000 tons of bombs on Khe San and reduced the verdant Vietnamese country to charred desert, an American public likely overlooked the chilling, symbolic motto inscribed on American aircraft: “Only you can prevent a forest.” As a nod to the popular Smokey the Bear slogan that admonished Americans to fight forest fires, this altered phrasing was not only perversely ironic in light of Vietnam’s napalm-induced burning, but also indicative of the War’s ecological paradox. That is, critics coined the word “ecocide” specifically to criminalize the eradication of the Vietnamese environment, but in the end, Vietnam evolved into both a global “environmental crisis” and a mirror for American environmentalism. As journalist Arnold Isaacs once noted, “the national argument on Vietnam was really about America’s vision of itself.” Thus, as Vietnam gave birth to broader environmental discourse, it faded into the background, so that rather than a singular instance of ecocide, Vietnam became simply a case study of the structural problems that plagued society as a whole.

The Origins of Ecocide

If there was ever a time when American environmentalism struck a hollow note, it was during the Cold War era, when the U.S. government built a duplicitous environmental record. Though an orchestrator of international environmental forums and U.N. initiatives, behind the scenes, the U.S. had stockpiled a substantial arsenal of chemical armaments; by the end of the 1950s, American scientists had screened over 12,000 compounds, and in 1961, the military launched a spraying campaign in South Vietnam. The herbicides employed in Vietnam were,

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4 Anderson, 190.
5 Anderson, 179.
quite literally, no different from the garden variety: farmers and homeowners used the same two compounds—2,4-D and 2,4,5-T—that, combined, created the toxic cocktail known as Agent Orange.\textsuperscript{6} Along with several other colorful “Agents” (Purple, Pink, White, Blue), the concoction quickly became the military’s weapon of choice, valued for its versatility—among myriad applications, it obliterated Vietnam’s forest cover, annihilated its crops, and ultimately smothered fifteen percent of Vietnam’s countryside.\textsuperscript{7} However, before the U.S. eventually settled on a limited repertoire of herbicides, it had invited chemical corporations to develop prototypes chemicals for the war. Needing no further incentive, companies such as Dow Chemical, Pennsalt, Ethyl Corporation, and Monsanto all scrambled to cook up the next-best ecological weapon and secure a lucrative military contract.\textsuperscript{8}

Agent Orange comprised a multifaceted attack on Vietnam’s ecosystems, wildlife, and human inhabitants. Although the U.S. maintained that Agent Orange classified as a defoliant, in reality, it was a euphemistic misnomer whether the military meant it or not. Whereas a genuine defoliant only removed the leaves, Agent Orange and its companion chemicals killed a plant entirely. Like DDT, an insidious danger before Silent Spring shed light on the subject, the U.S. military shrouded ecological destruction in secrecy. Anthony Lewis’s of the New York Times argued that “defoliation” was a dim abstraction that distanced Americans from the Vietnamese environment and enabled emotional detachment.\textsuperscript{9} For the public, ecocide’s ambiguous and suggestive nomenclature only intensified the uneasy sense of a corrupt, yet mysterious, political system. To accompany the benign color scheme of herbicides, there was the “daisy cutter,” a floral-sounding title that belied this bomb’s ability to level a forested area the size of a football

\textsuperscript{6} Anderson, 181-182.
\textsuperscript{7} Anderson, 184.
\textsuperscript{8} Anderson, 181-182.
\textsuperscript{9} Anderson, 182-184.
field. Further, the “Rome Plow” had a noble ring that implied an implement of cultivation, production, and progress, while in actuality, it was the name for the bulldozers that did the opposite—an army of them cleared up to 1,000 acres a day to deprive the Viet Cong of hiding places.10, 11

Not only did the U.S. ascribe pseudo-environmental names to its instruments of war, but also to the overarching aim of American intervention in Vietnam. “Operation Ranch Hand” and “Operation Trail Dust” referred, respectively, to the aerial and ground dispersal of Agent Orange (i.e. released from planes versus jeeps and soldier-mounted backpacks).12 Once again, Vietnam’s ecocide reflected back to U.S. shores—in this example, through subtle allusions to America’s rich agricultural and pioneer heritage. Thus, even Vietnam rhetoric gave environmentalists reason to fear pervasive structural injustice. In essence, the U.S. government had taken the pastoral ranch, so quintessential a symbol of the American West, and corrupted it, so that suddenly, it seemed complicit in the ecocide occurring overseas. And in truth, the missions’ nicknames were more than just playful military jargon—they represented the real, disquieting connection between American Big Ag and Vietnamese ecocide, both recipients of chemical “support” from “Corporate America.”13 Moreover, the name of the other military project, “Trail Dust,” perhaps provoked doubts about ecocide’s potential ulterior motives. To justify and explain away the ecological destruction, the U.S. cited the innumerable American lives that this strategy saved: not only could U.S. soldiers directly eliminate Viet Cong from the safety of aircraft, but herbicide spraying also lessened the incidence of deadly ambushes (by destroying

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10 Anderson, 184.
12 Anderson, 119.
Viet Cong cover) and weakened enemy resistance through “resource denial,” namely crop destruction and subsequent soldier starvation.\textsuperscript{14} According to estimates, Agent Orange ravaged a quantity of food that would have fed 600,000 for a year.\textsuperscript{15}

Yet at the same time, the loaded term “Trail Dust” validated the skeptics who could not shake the feeling that the military was trailblazing through Vietnam. Indeed, when renowned environmental economist Paul Erhlich visited Middlebury in April 1970, he drew a parallel between the “population-resource-environment crisis” and America’s invasion of Vietnam. Ehrlich opined that, “in an unprecedented atrocity the United States is murdering the people of Vietnam and destroying the ecology of that country primarily to protect American interests in the natural resources of southeast Asia.”\textsuperscript{16} In addition, the fact that U.S. servicemen referred to themselves as “cowboys” and the Viet Cong as “Indians” evoked neocolonialism and the ideology of a modern American frontier;\textsuperscript{17} furthermore, it solidified the suspicion that the U.S. had more at stake in Vietnam than political \textit{containment}. Rather, Ehrlich suggested that the War served as an excuse for American environmental \textit{expansion} and resource appropriation. Once more, it is apparent that ecocide, assumed to be endemic to Vietnam, in fact had ramifications that extended far beyond the physical range of bombs and herbicides. Those who presumed that ecocide was simply the environmental means to a political end might have wondered whether the U.S. environment’s lack of resources or rising unmet demand actually lay at the heart of the

\textsuperscript{15} Anderson, 185.
\textsuperscript{17} Charles Waugh, “‘Only You Can Prevent a Forest’: Agent Orange, Ecocide, and Environmental Justice,” (\textit{Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment} 17, no. 1, Winter 2010), 116.
Conflict. Could it be that ecocide in Vietnam was not unprecedented, but rather the result of the slow degradation and depletion—a gradual “ecocide”—of America’s natural capital?

The question appeared to loom on the minds of environmentalists, some of whom interpreted ecocide in Vietnam as a microcosm of the global political, economic, and ecological hierarchy. Lee Webb, a speaker at the September 1971 “Vermont Conference on Peace and Justice” held at Middlebury College, delivered a dissertation on “Colonialism and Underdevelopment in Vermont.” He asserted that, “Vermont is as much a colony of American capitalism as are the nations of Africa, Asia and Latin America,” and that, as an “internal colony,” the state’s “industry…land…and resources” fell prey to the familiar threat: “big monopoly corporations.” Although Webb made no explicit mention of Vietnam, his message at least indirectly invoked the conflict. The lecture served as another example of how Americans environmentalists and countercultural leaders, in their appeal to Vietnam’s environmental plight, lent urgency to the domestic cause. Yet when environmentalists generalized ecocide in order to claim a universally corrupt power structure, in a certain way, they detracted from Vietnam’s unrivaled environmental ruin.

To environmentalists, weather manipulation may have been the most egregious and definitive evidence of an imbalanced and power-hungry political system. When the press divulged the Pentagon Papers—government documents that contained highly classified secrets—it became common knowledge that the military was toying with the idea of environmental modification for warfare purposes. As illustration, the U.S. Air Force had initiated “Project Popeye” with the intention to prolong the monsoon season in Laos and Vietnam—the rationale that manmade rain would make for a muddier Ho Chi Minh trail and restricted enemy troop movements. Since “rainmaking,” as it was called, suggested the possibility of collusion between

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science and government, groups like the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) acted quickly to defend their innocence.\textsuperscript{19}

It seems that weather modification was the tipping point that thrust environmentalism into global crisis mode. Though in theory Project Popeye targeted only Vietnam, its implications went far beyond one country’s borders. Climate manipulation was the environmental equivalent of domino theory: if governments could harness weather—the ultimate variable beyond human control—there was no telling how far “geophysical warfare” would go. In the end, cutting-edge western environmentalism came uncomfortably face-to-face with its “reflection” in the East. Thanks to Project Popeye, the cold political climate escalated into the incendiary issue of global environmental security, and Vietnamese ecocide, initially an intra-national disaster, evolved into a trans-boundary threat. The emergence of “terroristic science,” as scholar Jacob Hamlin calls it, brought Vietnam full circle;\textsuperscript{20} and indeed, Barry Weisberg’s concept of the “ecocidal boomerang” epitomizes the way in which U.S. foreign policy in a single Southeast Asian nation shaped American environmentalism.\textsuperscript{21} The question was whether the U.S., and especially its hot-blooded youth, had prepared for it.

\textbf{Environmentalism on the Home Front}

To an American public seized with antiwar sentiment, Vietnam’s ecological destruction was symptomatic of “a sick society”—the diagnosis given by Dave Dellinger, keynote speaker at the Vermont Conference on Peace and Justice.\textsuperscript{22} Yet there remained a disjuncture between the way Vietnam encouraged the American public to perceive environmental problems as linked to larger political and economic institutions, and how it promoted grassroots environmental protest.

\textsuperscript{19} Anderson, 203.
\textsuperscript{20} Anderson, 200-203.
\textsuperscript{21} Weisberg, 8.
\textsuperscript{22} The Middlebury Campus, “Conference Deemed Success,” LXVII, 2, 1971-09-30.
Across the U.S., college students often seemed to pursue small-scale solutions to the deep-seated and sometimes vaguely defined problems that they discerned. Perhaps ecocide in Vietnam magnified environmental disaster to such an unprecedented scale that students, overwhelmed with a sense of powerlessness, effected environmental change in the only place where they could: their immediate surroundings. For instance, the outspoken leader of Middlebury’s Environmental Council, Tom Plumb participated in the compilation of a text titled *Ecotage*. As the portmanteau of “ecology” and “sabotage,” the word connoted nature’s revenge: if the political economy destroyed the environment through ecocide, then this was the manner by which the Earth could retaliate.

An anthology of recommendations for civil disobedience against Corporate America, *Ecotage* demonstrated the disparity between the public’s sweeping critiques of the system, versus its relatively narrow and localized responses. The book’s suggestions ran the gamut, but some related directly to Vietnam; one individual proposed to, “spray defoliants on military bases—Agent Orange might really upset people if its effects were felt closer to home rather than in some remote Southeast Asian country.” From this advice, it is apparent that people recognized the vast scale of the environmental crisis, and knew, deep down, the futility of actions like the above. Although improbable that people could give the military a taste of its own medicine, and fanciful to expect that such forms of protest would benefit the environment, *Ecotage* provided a forum for average citizens to vent their frustrations. Colleges served the same purpose, and judging by the emotionally charged editorials that characterized *The Campus* during the War, Middlebury students harbored strong opinions on how to resolve the conflict and the corresponding environmental problems.

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When the Americans condemned the amorphous “system” for the ecological harm that it caused, their rhetoric was eerily reminiscent of Vietnam and ecocide. For instance, in her editorial piece, “The Crisis of the Environment,” Ada Louise Huxtable vilified the U.S. economy’s “bulldozer approach” to development that “tears up the farm or forest” and “clear[s] the way for…the irreversible loss of the country’s natural assets.” Whether or not she was aware, on a deeper level, Huxtable decried more than America’s “Machine in the Garden”; she also recalled the image of a Rome Plow, that great leveler of the Vietnamese landscape. Further, Huxtable observed that conservation’s emphasis on the evils of individual consumerism distracted from the institutions, which she identified as federal policies and the “industrial blight,” that exacted a heavy toll on the American landscape—countryside and city alike. Huxtable’s fixation on the systemic nature of environmental problems suggests that Vietnam may have planted a seed in people’s minds: what if the government was enacting a gradual ecocide on U.S. shores as well, a kind of slow violence that eroded away at the American landscape?

Often, it appears that university students in the U.S. shared Huxtable’s vision of a corrupt world order. Said one Wes Fisher, an environmental student of the University of Minnesota, “we don’t want to be labeled as ‘conservationists’…pollution is just the symptom.” Wisconsin’s Ecology Students Association, an early pioneer of youth environmental activism, chose to castigate U.S. military operations in Vietnam in its first publication. For students already incensed by the War’s human casualties, Vietnam became the bridge that “linked the destruction of life and property…to the exploitation and damage to the environment in this country.”

However, whereas some students gave harsh appraisals of the American political system, others

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admitted their complicity in the conflict. In a *Campus* article that solicited student donations during “Medical Aid to Indochina Week,” author Bill Reedy allowed that, “The U.S. government has used our money to kill, starve, and maim millions of Asian men women and children…to make the countryside unlivable, and to waste the lives of 50,000 Americans in the process.”

In short, it seems that a contingent of Middlebury students saw themselves as accomplices to crimes against both humanity and the environment. Yet the students who conceded their guilt also sought to remedy the situation—and alleviate their culpability—more actively than peers who simply described the societal disease. During the War, the Environmental Council worked tirelessly to implement new campus initiatives, including recycling campaigns, energy conservation (by encouraging students to turn off lights), and appeals to dining services in the hope that dining halls might offer expanded vegetarian options in the context of the 1970s global food crisis. Although much of Middlebury’s activism during Vietnam remained confined to the campus, student-led environmentalism recognized that structural and systemic problems did not demand equally grandiose solutions. Middlebury cultivated a small yet significant environmentalism that functioned at the local level, yet strove towards wider influence. Sometimes, Middlebury’s environmentalism connected to the world through symbolic gestures, such as the choice to eat more mindfully during a time of heightened world hunger.

**Conclusion: “Only You Can”**

Ultimately, the words writ large on the sides of U.S. Air Force C-123 cargo planes, though referential to the pilots who razed Vietnam to its literal roots, also issued a tacit challenge to the far-removed American public. Often, those such as Middlebury students would rise to the

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30 *The Middlebury Campus*
occasion and discredit Smokey the Bear’s (modified) suggestion that their consumptive lifestyle led to forest loss and other environmental consequences; in this case, students and citizens saw themselves as outside “the system,” and sometimes, the solution to it. Conversely, at other times, students succumbed to the sense of guilt that ecocide instilled, and instead framed themselves as part of the flawed institutions and industries that Vietnam so vividly spotlighted. Perhaps Vietnam illuminated environmentalism’s dualistic self-image: on the one hand haunted by both its own hypocrisy and the hopelessness of society, and on the other, convinced of its capacity to right the world’s wrongs.

References


