

# Death in the Abstract JAN 4 1971

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LONDON, Jan. 3—Vietnam does not dominate our consciousness as it did. Weariness suppresses thought about any subject eventually, and we find reasons for wishing it away. The reasons in Vietnam, though they promise no real end, are the lower casualties and gradual American withdrawal.

But every once in a while something forces us to consider again the significance of what has happened in Vietnam and is still happening. That should be the case with the report on defoliation just made to the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

The United States has systematically sprayed chemical herbicides over large areas of South Vietnam since 1962. A commission appointed by the A.A.A.S. to study the program found that it has had devastating effects on the countryside.

About five million acres, an eighth of the country, have been sprayed. According to Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, we have used six pounds of the plant-killing chemicals for every man, woman and child in South Vietnam.

Both crops and forests have been poisoned. The defoliation program has deprived about 800,000 people of their normal supplies of rice and other food. In theory, they were to be the Vietcong. In fact, most have turned out to be Montagnards, the indigenous mountain people who have been notably opposed to the Communists.

The chemical killing of forests has cost South Vietnam nearly \$500 million worth of prime hardwood. It has destroyed a fifth of the country's 1.2 million acres of mangrove forests. Alarming, vegetation is not return-

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ing to the dead mangrove areas. Moreover, the killing of inland forests has made the areas subject to disastrous erosion by rain that carries off the soil nutrients.

All this simply records the effects on the land of South Vietnam. The direct impact on people is harder to measure. The A.A.A.S. study found some increases in birth defects after spraying, for example, but could not scientifically attribute them to the spraying.

President Nixon has now ordered the defoliation program phased out by next spring. We should be glad of that decision—and at the same time recognize what it implicitly says about the moral character of what we have been doing.

Defoliation as a word has an abstract, Latin ring. It does not instantly make us visualize primitive mountain villages cut off from their local rice and roots, or miles of lifeless mangrove swamps. It might focus our minds to think of the Florida Everglades suddenly dead, or the Blue Hills of Virginia brown and bare.

But it is not just in this area that we use a generalized technical concept—"defoliation"—to conceal the reality of a destroyed country and dead individuals. The United States military in Vietnam have made it a general practice to treat mass methods of death and destruction as abstractions.

We have free-fire zones, a clean-sounding phrase for the mass expulsion of people from their own homes and land so an alien army can kill

without qualms every living creature that remains. When we bomb North Vietnam, it is only a "protective reaction strike," which does not sound as though it hurts anyone.

This is more than verbal trickery. A very large part of the Vietnam war's moral horror, for us Americans, has been our ability to conceal its human significance from ourselves. Our military technology is so advanced that we kill at a distance and insulate our consciences by the remoteness of it all.

That is why the court-martial of Lieutenant Calley for the Sonmy massacre, if guilt is established, is so deeply troubling. To kill women and children with a gun is a crime, but how does it differ morally from the mass bombing and burning and spraying that have been official policy in Vietnam?

It is not that we are crueller than the other side in Vietnam; far from it. It is just that we have overpowering means of death, and we have used them almost casually—telling ourselves that we did it for the good of the Vietnamese, but never really defining ends and means in a dehumanized war.

In the British magazine *New Society*, Roger Barnard points out that Lieutenant Calley, if he did what he was charged with doing, acted against the background of a war waged on the theory of collective guilt. Whole communities were punished "for being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Jean-Paul Sartre, Mr. Barnard recalls, said that evil is a product of man's ability to make abstract that which is concrete. The Vietnam war has shown us how profound an insight that is, and how terrifying in a technological age.