

Scorch Their Earth

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, May 7—American bombing and shelling since 1965 have produced 21 million craters in South Vietnam.

That is the estimate of a scholarly study published in this month's Scientific American. It is a figure so breathtaking that one must pause a moment to take it in: 21 million craters. On the land surface of a country the size of Missouri.

The study is by Professors Arthur H. Westing of Windham College and E. W. Pfeiffer of the University of Montana. They previously did an extensive report on the effects of herbicides in Vietnam. Their new study considers the long-term environmental impact of explosives. It is based on official figures, interviews and surveys on the ground in Vietnam and from helicopters.

There is a suitably methodical, dispassionate tone to the report. But some who read it will not be able to remain detached. They will find in its charts and calm words a definitive indictment of American policy in Vietnam.

These are some of the findings:

1. From 1965 through 1971, United States forces used 26 billion pounds of explosives in Indochina. That is twice what the U.S. used in all theaters in World War II.

2. Of those 26 billion pounds, 21-billion were exploded in South Vietnam. That amounts to 497 pounds per acre of the country, or 1,215 pounds for every inhabitant.

3. The bombs and shells are estimated by the study to have left 21-million craters in South Vietnam, displaced 2.75 billion cubic yards of earth and sprayed fragments over 26-million acres of the countryside.

The talk of acres and displaced earth cannot really evoke the human tragedy of Vietnam: The displaced and crippled people. But every so often Professors Westing and Pfeiffer offer a first-hand observation that gives human meaning to their statistics.

In the Mekong Delta they saw four-year-old craters in what had been rice paddies; the craters were deep in water, had tall reeds in them and were useless for rice-growing. The valuable forests of Vietnam, they write, have been bombarded so intensively that the trees are spotted with pieces of metal. That makes the trees rot. When they are cut for lumber, sawmill operators try to chop the metal fragments out by hand but cannot find them all; many saw blades are ruined.

If anything, the report probably understates the total impact of American bombing. It covers only the seven years from 1965 through 1971, and some of the most intensive bombing has come this year.

AT HOME ABROAD

The study concludes that there will be severe and long-lasting effects on the ecology of Vietnam: land erosion, destruction of farmland and forests, increased breeding of mosquitoes, seepage of salt water into fresh and so on. It will be extremely difficult to undo the effects, the authors say. They note that craters from World War I are still visible at Verdun.

The striking thing disclosed is not only the immense volume of American ordnance used in this war but the proportion of it used inside South Vietnam. In that small country, the one we are supposedly there to save, we have employed explosives with the energy of 363 Hiroshima nuclear bombs.

What we have done in Vietnam, then, is to follow a scorched-earth policy. But it has not been our earth that we have destroyed, or usually our people that we have risked. We have done most of our destroying from a distance. It was been a policy of Scorch Their Earth.

In this column recently I wrote that the bombing of Vietnam showed the United States to be, today, the most dangerous and destructive power on earth. Some readers found the statement outrageous. I think the Scientific American report confirms its truth.

After publication of these estimated figures on bombing and shelling, surely there can no longer be any argument about destructiveness. No other country comes close to what the United States has done in the last few years. As for being dangerous, at this moment informed people in London and Washington and elsewhere are deeply fearful that an insecure President, facing defeat, may strike some terrible and perilous new blow—not to prevent the defeat but to salve his pride with revenge.

It is painful for countries, as for individuals, to face the truth about themselves. But there is no way for the United States to rebuild its self-confidence or its reputation without facing the truth about what we have done in Vietnam.

Of course there are those who dismiss concern about our policy in Vietnam as the guilt feelings of sentimental liberals. To wage that kind of war, they say, shows strength in a practical world. I think it shows weakness. A policy of mass destruction appalls our friends and wounds ourselves. Those who still favor that policy, after all that has happened, are the truly irrational men.

See also "The Bombing in Indochina," by Anthony Lewis, NYTimes 1 and 3 Jan 72, this file. Part I also deals with study by Pfeiffer and Westing.