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Secrecy And Geoengineering As A Weapon Of War (Our Geoengineering Age, Part 4)

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Publisher's Note: This is the fourth installment in our series on geoengineering. Our skies are our most visible and vital global Commons, and they are under siege by powerful forces we are just beginning to understand. Our Geoengineering Age series tells the story of the most important and underreported global environmental phenomenon of our time, and is researched and written by [Chelsea Green](#) co-founder Ian Baldwin.

[Read installment #1 – “Monkey Wrenching Vermont’s Night Sky” – here.](#)

[Read installment #2 – “Beyond Global Climate Talks” – here.](#)

[Read installment #3 – “The Sorcerer’s Apprentices at Play at the Dawn of the Geoengineering Age” – here.](#)

Installment #5 will appear on Tuesday, June 6th.



U.S. aircraft executing “Operation Popeye,” a secret multi-year weather weaponization project in Vietnam.

When the US was bogged down in Indochina, it launched its highly secret weather modification program Operation Popeye to “make mud, not war” over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This program was executed from 1967 to 1972 without the knowledge of either the governments of South Vietnam, Laos, or Thailand (from where the spray planes took off and landed, at Udon Air Base) or of the US ambassadors to those countries.[1] Not only pivotal ambassadors but top Congressional committee chairs as well as “many usually well-informed members of the Nixon administration had been kept in the dark,” according to Seymour Hersh.[2]

When syndicated columnist Jack Anderson reported on Operation Popeye in March 1971, Congress demanded disclosure in a series of hearings that lasted for two years as the military refused to divulge information. Quoting a well-informed official, Hersh explained, “This kind of thing [secret weather-modification warfare] was a bomb...and Henry [Kissinger] restricted information about it to those who had to know.”[3] Although Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara reportedly ordered a halt to the operation, according to Hersh’s sources “it went underground—into the dark”[4] and continued there until Hersh exposed it in his July 1972 *New York Times* reports.

Covert means covert. Few, very few of the many people needed and cleared to implement a classified military operation know the entirety of ‘the big picture’ even as it unfolds, except on a strict, hierarchical need-to-know basis. The ‘need-to-know’ system was institutionalized, in effect, by US Army engineer and Lieutenant General Leslie Groves, who oversaw the construction of the Pentagon and went on to direct the Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb, which ended up employing 130,000 people, very, very few of whom knew what

the project really was.



U.S. aircraft equipped to wage secret weather warfare in Vietnam.

When Franklin D. Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, his successor, Vice President Harry Truman, “knew only the bare fact of the Manhattan Project’s existence.” [5] As Truman reported in his memoirs, when Secretary of War Henry Stimson debriefed him shortly after FDR’s death, he did not do so fully: “...he wanted me to know about an immense project that was underway — a project looking to the development of a new explosive of almost unbelievable destructive power. That was all he felt free to say at the time, and his statement left me puzzled...but he gave me no details.” [6] The soon-to-be President of the United States could not be told the full story until later, when he formally assumed the role of Commander-in-Chief. As Vice President of the United States he lived in the dark when it came to the state’s topmost military secret, a fate he shared with practically everyone else inside the government’s top echelons.

The military and intelligence communities work according to principles of “compartmentalization” (operations, including research, are broken into segments, none of whose participants understand the details of the whole enterprise) and “need-to-know,” that together function as “containment,” so that the overall project or program’s intent is masked or opaque to all but a very few decision makers.[7] Ambassadors and powerful senators are among those high up in the hierarchy who may be foreclosed. As former insider Daniel Ellsberg, who had many security clearances, admitted: “Once I was inside the government, my awareness of how easily and pervasively Congress, the public, and journalists were fooled and misled contributed to a lack of respect” for them.[8]

The anthropologist Hugh Gusterson observed: “Secrecy is a means by which power constructs itself as power, and the knowledge of secrets is a perquisite of power.”[9] Pervasive secrecy and democracy cannot coexist. The experiment

that began with the inauguration of George Washington as the first US president in 1789 is or will be (or has been) undone when secrecy reaches a threshold beyond which the mores of empire eclipse those of a democratic republic.

In a report submitted to the Congress after the Vietnam War, the highly influential UCLA-based geoscientist Gordon J. F. MacDonald argued that the key lesson of that war was not the failure of Operation Popeye to alter its outcome but that “*one can conduct covert operations using a new technology in a democracy without the knowledge of the people*” [emphasis added].[10] This lesson has been bred into the bones of the military establishments of the Western democracies ever since Vietnam.

In reaction to the massive use of weather modification, defoliants, and herbicides such as Agent Orange, as well as other toxic aerosols — directly killing one to 3.5 million Vietnamese, maiming tens of thousands still being born with birth defects, and disrupting the ecology of 40 percent of their land, “reducing dense jungles and mangrove forests to barren wastelands”[11]— the world community created the 1978 Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques (ENMOD). Rattled by the uproar caused by Daniel Ellsberg’s release of the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times* and the subsequent US Senate hearings led by Senator Frank Church, the US ratified ENMOD in 1979.

However, rather than halting weather and other environmental modification programs, the treaty had the effect of causing them to be more rigorously disguised as “research” or sequestered inside the unscrutinized budgets of “‘black’ or secret operations,”[12] and thus outside either the purview of ENMOD or US citizens and their institutions of representation. After ENMOD the military-science-industrial research complex went further underground.[13] Two decades later, 9-11 drove it yet deeper underground with the advent of a new, corrosive ethos of perpetual war[14] that again made the words ‘national security’ a supreme state prerogative, an unchallengeable barrier to independent inquiry, and furthered the steady retreat of the mainstream press’s willingness to confront power.

Gordon MacDonald, who served on the National Science Foundation’s Advisory Panel for Weather Modification from 1964 to 1967, had warned that ENMOD or environmental warfare “could damage an adversary without revealing its [the aggressor’s] intent” and that “applying such techniques [of war] under cover of nature’s irregularities presents a disquieting prospect.”[15] MacDonald added that a secretly waged weather war “*need never be declared or even known by the affected populations*. It could go on for years with *only the country’s [aggressor’s] security forces involved being aware of it*” (emphasis added), as the complex randomness of the weather makes accusations of aggression plausibly deniable. [16]

Geoengineering as a species of environmental modification hides inside the

military-science-industrial complex, a symbol of power fully endowed with the charisma secrecy bestows.

Ian Baldwin is a life-long environmentalist and co-founder and Publisher Emeritus of [Chelsea Green](#). After working for several national environmental organizations in the 1970s, he co-founded the EF Schumacher Society (US) before launching Chelsea Green in 1984 with his wife Margo Baldwin. In 2005, he and Rob Williams co-founded [Vermont Commons: Voices of Independence](#) to explore the possibilities of rescaled living in a future Vermont republic.

SOURCES:

[1] Fleming, *Fixing the Sky*, 180.

[2] Seymour Hersh, "Rainmaking Is Used As Weapon by U.S.," *The New York Times*, July 3, 1972.

[3] Seymour Hersh, "Weather As a Weapon Of War," *The New York Times*, July 9, 1972.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 614.

[6] As quoted in Richard Rhodes, *Op. Cit.*, 617.

[7] Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002). See also Begich and Manning, *Angels*, 84 and Gusterson, *Nuclear Rites*, 75-92.

[8] Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 44.

[9] Gusterson, *Nuclear Rites*, 87.

[10] Fleming, *Fixing the Sky*, 182.

[11] Bertell, *Planet Earth*, 158. See also: Dana Visalli, "[The Greatest Danger in the World Today](#)," *Information Clearing House*, May 1, 2015. Accessed May 28, 2015,

[12] Pauline Cantwell, talk presented at the United Nations DPI/NGO Conference, September 5, 2007. Accessed May 20, 2015.

[13] Bertell, *Planet Earth*, 45-46, 114. See also Fleming, *Fixing the Sky*, 184-186.

[12] James Risen, *Pay Any Price: Greed, Power, and Endless War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

[14] Gordon J F MacDonald, “How to Wreck the Environment,” in *Unless Peace Comes: A Scientific Forecast of New Weapons*, ed. Nigel Calder (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 188.

[15] Ibid., 203.

[16] Ibid, 203.

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