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Book Review: Ecology of War and Peace: Counting Costs of Conflict

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Ecology of War and Peace: Counting Costs of Conflict

By Tom H. Hastings

Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000. 142 pages.

Reviewed by **Elizabeth L. Chalecki**

“**S**i pacem para pacem” (“If you want peace, prepare for peace”). With this sentiment, Tom Hastings opens the door to a discussion of the interrelationship between violent conflict and environmental damage. Hastings, who is coordinator of the Peace, Conflict and Global Studies Program at Northland College, makes his “bias” clear on the first full page: he is a proponent of nonviolence, and advocates the abolition of all war and war preparation.¹ This is a noble opinion, but it necessarily limits the resulting discussion of possible security issues, since he believes that any kind of military force is useless at best and dangerous at worst. In addition, while he acknowledges in passing the existence of similar problems in other countries, his focus is entirely on the misdeeds of the United States. *Ecology of War and Peace* is not for the scholar; rather, it appeals to lay persons or undergraduates just beginning to study this subject and who might not have thought of these connections.

The book’s first section, entitled “Ecological Costs of War Readiness,” introduces the reader to the ecological damage resulting from development and testing of nuclear, chemical, and electromagnetic weapons. Hastings’ main premise is that by poisoning ourselves with weapons production and disposal, we are the cause of our own insecurity. In addressing these issues, he (a) questions the military logic that writes off the people and wildlife in and around Paducah, Kentucky as “acceptable losses” in pursuit of U.S. nuclear power; and (b) points out that testing, deployment, and disposal of nuclear and chemical weapons largely occurs on native-held lands over the protests of indigenous people. The second section, “Shooting Wars: Mother Earth as Collateral Damage,” discusses (a) the ecological damage caused by the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam, (b) the 1998-1999 air campaign in Serbia, and (c) some of the environmental effects of refugee populations generated by war. The third section, entitled “Ecological Causes of Conflict,” deals with conflicts over water, the role of

free trade in exacerbating unsustainable resource extraction and use, and the poverty that underlies conflict. In these two sections, Hastings relies heavily on anecdotal evidence, and repeatedly states that “stories of... harmful environmental activities are commonplace.” A bit more elaboration surrounding such statements would have been very useful. The book’s fourth section, entitled “Ecology of Peace,” examines nonviolence as a solution to conflict, largely leaving the environmental question aside. Here, Hastings points out that the necessary conditions for war include humans’ willingness to kill each other under certain circumstances and access to sufficient weaponry to do so. He concludes that a nonviolent conflict-management system would allow humans to value all life on earth, not just their own.

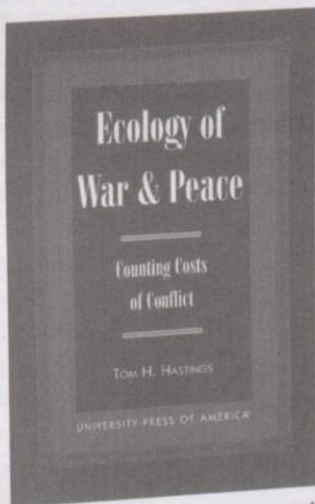
Many features of this book are worthy of praise. Hastings’ concern for humankind and passion for environmental and social justice are unquestionable. He recounts with sympathy the stories of pilot Herb O’Brien, who contracted throat cancer after disarming a nuclear

weapon in a radiation suit that failed to cover his neck, and soldier Tim Gilmore, who developed inoperable tumors after exposure to Agent Orange. He also brings up interesting questions that most scholars in this field would not relate to security questions—such as the difference between “hard” ethics (based upon scientific evidence) and “soft” ethics (based upon “charismatic and emotional appeal”).

Unfortunately, those looking for a systematic and academically rigorous examination of the ecological costs of war will have to look elsewhere. There are very few references to sources, a lack of

documentation that is especially frustrating to those who would like to know more about any particular point or incident. Instead, the author makes general statements, such as “the scientific community concluded time and time again...” (page 41) without providing any supporting evidence. Occasionally he will cite something, only for the reader to find that it is from the Grandmothers For Peace Newsletter or other such gray sources. Referencing a more comprehensive list of peer-reviewed literature in this field would have been extremely helpful.

Hastings also touches briefly and without substance on issues with major environmental security impacts, such as global warming, the World Trade Organization, the relationship of terrorism to national security, and the role of non-governmental organizations and coalitions in changing the defense agenda to include environmental



issues. Finally, a few jarring phrases (such as referring to the Vietnamese as “illiterate and nearly Stone Age peasants”) mar the otherwise hopeful tone of the book. Given the criticisms above, *Ecology of War and Peace* should be considered a call to activism for those who want to incorporate personal moral beliefs into their environmental security studies. **W**

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ENDNOTES

¹ Hastings is clearly inspired by Christian anarchist Ammon Hennacy, who used nonviolent, faith-based activism to protest development and testing of the atomic bomb.

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