



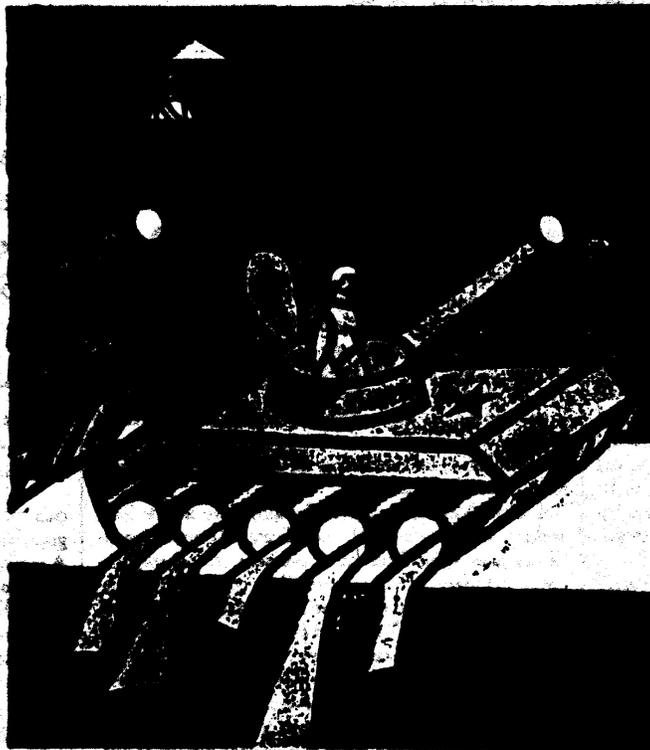
OVER THERE: THE U.S. MILITARY'S TOXIC REACH

AT THE HEIGHT OF THE COLD war, the United States projected its power worldwide from a network of nearly 400 military bases. Today, many of them are simply irrelevant, and the Department of Defense has begun to sound retreat: Over the next five years, twenty-four foreign bases will be closed, and activities will be scaled back at another eighty-five.

When the band-aids come down and the soldiers and the weapons go home, one of the Pentagon's best-kept secrets will finally come to light: American bases overseas are extremely polluted. Although the specifics are yet unknown, early indications suggest that decades of reckless practices have left hundreds of contaminated sites around the world. Civilian water supplies have been contaminated by jet fuel that leaked from underground storage tanks and from solvents and other chemicals that were improperly disposed of. At numerous Third World bases, the military has disposed of many of its hazardous wastes by mixing them in with assorted lots of innocuous surplus material and selling them to the local population.

Six years ago, with mounting evidence of widespread toxic contamination at the military's domestic bases, Congress asked the General Accounting Office (GAO) to study environmental conditions at the nation's bases overseas. On the eve of the report's release in 1986, however, the Pentagon classified it and prevented its distribution. Calling it a matter of national security, Pentagon officials worried, no doubt correctly, that opponents of American bases in countries around the world would seize upon the report — which excoriated the Pentagon for the environmental conditions at eleven of the thirteen investigated overseas installations — to rally support to throw the Americans out.

This fall, after five years of steady pressure from Congress and the media, the Pentagon finally allowed the release of the 1986 report and a more recent follow-up



study, but only in censored form. Information is excised on nearly every page. Four consecutive pages are blacked out entirely. All mention of specific bases is deleted, as are many of the details of environmental violations. A note on the cover explains, in the vernacular of the military, that the report has been "sanitized." Unfortunately, though, the same cannot be said of the overseas bases themselves.

The two reports present a scathing overview of the Pentagon's pollution abroad, including charges of widespread "negligent practices," "improper hazardous-waste disposal practices" and "unauthorized dumping." At overseas bases, congressional investigators say, hazardous wastes are stored in leaking barrels, dumped down drains or simply poured on the ground. In fact, at nearly every base studied, the reports find ground or water pollution.

Both at home and abroad, American military bases have long operated like medieval fiefdoms with little re-

gard for the communities around them. Protected by fences, guards and secrecy laws, base personnel have regularly engaged in environmental practices long since outlawed elsewhere. In the United States, local pressure and legal action have forced the military to reverse its position. Since the late Eighties, the Defense Department has had to acknowledge that environmental laws apply to its domestic activities.

Not so overseas, however. Even though a 1978 Executive Order requires all "federal facilities" to comply with the nation's environmental laws, foreign bases are exempted. Instead, the military is directed to abide by the laws of the countries in which its bases are located. But many countries have little if any environmental legislation on the books. Even where laws do exist, GAO investigators say that base officials at fewer than one-third of the bases visited by the team had knowledge of the local environmental regulations. "At the European bases we visited," the more recent report says, "none of the service personnel had a working knowledge of host country laws." The hazardous-waste coordinators, the report continues, "did not know what, if any,

host country laws were relevant to hazardous waste management at U.S. bases."

WITH 226 AMERICAN BASES, GERMANY RANKS AS ONE OF the most militarized countries in the world. Initial reports indicate it also may be among the most polluted. The air force now acknowledges that it has polluted surface or ground water at every one of its fourteen major bases in Germany (as well as its forty other bases in Europe). In 1989, for example, German authorities discovered that 300,000 gallons of toxic jet fuel from the Rhein-Main Air Base had leaked from underground piping into the major ground-water aquifer supplying drinking water to the city of Frankfurt. Also at Rhein-Main, according to base representative Stephen Knechtel, runoff from a vehicle-paint-stripping facility, a repair yard, a fire-training area and aircraft-maintenance-and-parking areas had drained

BY DAN GROSSMAN AND SETH SHULMAN

directly into the ground above the region's aquifer.

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Newly released reports notwithstanding, specifics about contamination at the military's far-flung network are hard to come by. But an inkling of what to expect can be gleaned from domestic bases. Because of its special status as a territory of the United States, the island of Guam offers a particularly good example. Two American bases there, one navy and one air force, take up more than half of the island's real estate. Strictly speaking, these are domestic bases, making information about their contamination more easily obtainable. But the island's remote location and its role in the military's Pacific strategy make it a likely indicator of conditions at American bases on other Pacific islands and in Japan and South Korea.

Between 1985 and 1986, the Guam Environmental Protection Agency identified seventy-nine violations of hazardous-waste laws on Guam's bases, half of which were considered serious. A 1987 GAO study reported that "improper dumping or spilling of hazardous waste" at the Guam Naval Complex had contaminated soil and polluted the ocean shore. Eight maintenance shops and facilities at Andersen Air Force Base were found to be discharging pollutants, including antifreeze and cleaning solution, directly onto the ground or into storm drains that flowed to wells above the island's primary aquifer — a source of drinking water for the majority of the island's population. Andersen base officials reported that their drinking water contained as much as six times the amount of trichloroethylene (TCE) allowed by the federal regulators. Used by the air force to remove grease from engine parts in great quantities at all of its bases, TCE is on the EPA's priority list of the fifteen worst organic contaminants.

If any nation bears the environmental brunt of the U.S. military's practices overseas, though, it may well be the Philippines. The two huge military facilities there are suspected of egregious environmental conditions. As one top-ranking military official has said: "If there's a horror story out there, Subic [Naval Station] may be it." After the eruption of Mount Pinatubo earlier this year, the air force evacuated its Clark Air Base permanently, leaving it under a foot of volcanic ash and soot. Subic may soon be closed as well — the Filipino senate recently voted not to renew the lease. No matter what, the current situation almost certainly precludes the possibility that the United States will ever redress the base's environmental legacy, leaving it to threaten the Filipino population for generations to come.

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As if to underscore his assertion, a dozen uniformed officers, each with a different environmental responsibility, peak Vest's office for a briefing. The unenviable job before Vest and his lieutenants is to clean up decades' worth of toxic dumping by the air force and to try to bring environmental consciousness to their branch of the military bureaucracy. Vest's office alone will administer some \$700 million this year on environmental cleanup and compliance; next year, he says, the air force's environmental budget alone will top \$1 billion. Yet, as is the case with all of the armed forces, virtually none of this money will be spent to clean up contamination at bases overseas.

Like his counterparts in the army and the navy, Vest says that the U.S. military is not required to abide by American environmental rules when they are more stringent than local laws. Brandishing a chart nearly the size of his executive desk, Vest explains that his goal for the air force

is to clean up the legacy of past practices, bring present activities into compliance with existing laws and prevent future pollution by minimizing the amount of toxic material required for its activities.

Despite Vest's enthusiasm, though, there is little hard evidence currently available to indicate that environmental practices at air-force bases overseas are actually improving. Indeed, the bases visited by congressional researchers in the most recent investigation contained "numerous incidents" of improper hazardous-waste disposal. Highly toxic wastes from electroplating, such as cyanide and heavy metals, were dumped directly into surface waters. Some base officials dumped toxic wastes in with regular trash and even burned the wastes as power-plant fuel, despite the toxic fumes that would result. Most of these activities took place unbeknown to local residents, but in one country — blacked out in the report but most likely Germany — the GAO discovered that two base commanders were under investigation by foreign authorities for unauthorized waste-disposal practices.

Motioning to the chart, Vest is clearly eager to describe his plan to improve air-force practices. "We want to change the culture in the air force so thoroughly and so well," Vest says, "that by the turn of the century there won't be concerns about air-force performance." Even if Vest succeeds at accomplishing this daunting mission, the air force and the other armed services still face a frightening legacy left from past practices.

In the United States, the cleanup of the military's toxic sites is paid for by a special fund — the Defense Environmental Restoration Account — authorized by Congress in 1986. The Pentagon currently plans to draw upon this fund to clean up more than 20,000 sites of contamination it believes to exist at its active and formerly owned installations. Overseas bases are not eligible for this money, however.

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The sad truth is that foreign bases slated for closure are even less likely to be cleaned up. Vest says that the United States doesn't own land at any overseas bases but is merely a "tenant," leasing the land from allied nations. At least in some places, he explains, host countries will be asked to pay for the added value the United States has contributed in the form of buildings, roads and aircraft runways. In a novel accounting move, rather than paying for the cost of contamination, the United States

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If Synar has his way, Vest's filing cabinet and many others like it around the world will someday be open for public inspection. The fallout could be very embarrassing to the United States. It could also prove extremely expensive, as foreign countries insist that the U.S. pay its share of the cleanup before leaving. For its part, the Pentagon is not eager to share its secrets. And at those bases where even the military is still unaware of the full extent of its environmental legacy, the Pentagon is in no hurry to find out.

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