

Operation Popeye

From 1967 to 1972 USAF C-130 aircraft illegally seeded clouds with silver iodide in areas of Laos, South Vietnam and North Vietnam near and around the Ho chi Minh trail. Conducted in top secret, it was hoped that increased rainfall and an extended southwest monsoon would disrupt the movement of men and supplies from North to South Vietnam. But heightened rains also hindered US air operations and impeded friendly troops.

On March 18, 1971, Washington Post reporter Jack Anderson broke the story of Operation Popeye. In response, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird testified before Congress in 1972 that “Anderson’s wild tales” were completely false.

But in a private letter from Laird that was leaked to the press in January of 1974, Laird admitted that he had lied in his 1972 testimony. The Defense Secretary was forced to attend a top secret Senate hearing where he and other military leaders were forced to admit that Anderson’s conspiracy theory was absolutely true.

In the following years, the success of Project Popeye was open to dispute. Scientists pointed out it was impossible to prove whether additional rainfall was a result of cloud-seeding, or just a normal part of the Vietnam monsoon season. Scientists noted that Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that cloud seeding increased rainfall by up to 30 percent were nothing more than a scientific guess. The difficulties the enemy had when traveling through seeded areas were no different than normal during that time of the year.

Scientists also pointed out that weather conditions over the Indian Ocean or South China Sea more likely contributed to the typhoons that occurred rather than Operation Popeye.

Before this debate was resolved, Senator Claiborne Pell and Congressman Donald Fraser led the political charge to ban the use of what was termed environmental modification. In 1978, the EnMod Convention was signed, which prohibits "Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques."

In response, the military officially announced it would terminate all environmental modification techniques, a statement which may or may not be true.