A Vietnam-era slogan proclaimed that “war is not healthy for children and other living things.” And war is indeed a danger to the environment. But perhaps less obviously, environmental disruption also makes wars more likely.

The slogan was appropriate for its time. The U.S. deforestation campaign in Southeast Asia caused environmental harm on an unprecedented scale. According to WorldWatch, “an estimated 35 percent of southern Vietnam’s inland hardwood forest was sprayed at least once. Some areas-those bordering roads and rivers, around military bases, and along the forested transport route known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail-were hit up to half a dozen times. . . . By some estimates, half of southern Vietnam’s mangroves were killed by defoliants.”

Vietnam is not the only example. As a result of civil war in Africa, during “two months at the end of 1996, for example, Mayi-Mayi rebels killed almost the entire population of hippopotamus on the Rutshuru and Rwindi Rivers, resulting in permanent changes in vegetation and impacts on fisheries.” (WorldWatch Institute). In 1991, Iraqi forces set fire to hundreds of oil wells, filling the air with smoke.

Sometimes, as in the Iraqi situation, the environmental harm is deliberate (which may constitute a war crime). But in other situations, the environment is collateral damage from armed conflict, because environmental preservation is never going to be a top priority in war time.

While war can harm the environment, environmental disruption – notably, climate change – can also set the stage for wars. For example, a study published early this year linked climate, drought, and massive migration from the Middle East: “The peer-reviewed study . . . analyzed sprawling data sets covering drought, battle deaths, ethnicity and political systems. Those were then combined with geographic information about refugee flows. The researchers discovered that deteriorating climate conditions played a ‘a statistically significant role’ in the recent waves of migrants fleeing Middle East conflict.” Two of Berkeley economists lead research concluding that “[d]eviations from normal precipitation and mild temperatures systematically increase the risk of conflict, often substantially. This relationship is apparent across spatial scales ranging from a single building to the globe and at temporal scales ranging from an anomalous hour to an anomalous millennium.” Notably, these studies took place in conflict-prone areas – the claim is not that climate change all by itself causes wars but rather that it is a risk amplifier This makes climate change something like asbestos: asbestos raises the risk of lung

cancer a bit, but among smokers, it has a much bigger effect. That's why the Pentagon and the CIA refer to climate change as a threat multiplier.

In the end, all of this simply confirms the close linkages between humans and the environment. When human societies are torn apart by war, the environment suffers the consequences. And when the environment is disrupted, the societies that depend on them also frisk violent disruption.