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Sommario/riassunto

"In The Defoliation of America, Amy M. Hay profiles the attitudes, understandings, and motivations of grassroots activists who rose to fight the use of phenoxy herbicides (commonly known as the Agent Orange chemicals) in various aspects of American life during the post-WWII era. First introduced in 1946, these chemicals mimic hormones in broadleaf plants, causing them to, essentially, grow to death while grass, grains, and other monocots remain unaffected. By the 1950s, millions of pounds of chemicals were produced annually for use in brush control, weed eradication, other agricultural applications, and forest management. The herbicides allowed suburban lawns to take root and become iconic symbols of success in American life. The production and application of phenoxy defoliants continued to skyrocket in subsequent years, encouraged by market forces and unimpeded by regulatory oversight. By the late 1950s, however, pockets of skepticism and resistance had begun to appear. The trend picked up steam after 1962, when Rachel Carson's Silent Spring directed mainstream attention to the harm modern chemicals were causing in the natural world. But it wasn't until the Vietnam War, when nearly 40 million gallons of Agent Orange and related herbicides were sprayed to clear the canopy and destroy crops in Southeast Asia, that the long-term damage associated with this group of chemicals began to attract widespread attention and alarm. Using a wide array of sources and an interdisciplinary approach, The Defoliation of America is organized in three parts. Part 1 (1945-70) examines the development, use, and responses to the new chemicals used to control weeds and remove jungle growth. As the herbicides became militarized, critics increasingly expressed concerns about defoliation in protests over US imperialism in Southeast Asia. Part 2 (1965-85) profiles three different women who, influenced by Rachel Carson, challenged the uses of the herbicides in the American West, affecting US chemical policy and regulations in the process. Part 3 (1970-95) revisits the impact and legacies of defoliant use after the Vietnam War. From countercultural containment and Nixon's declaration of the "War on Drugs" to the toxic effects on American and Vietnamese veterans, civilians, and their children, it became increasingly obvious that American herbicides damaged far more than forest canopies. With sensitivity to the role gender played in these various protests, Hay's study of the scientists, health and environmental activists, and veterans who fought US chemical regulatory policies and practices reveals the mechanisms, obligations, and constraints of state and scientific authority in midcentury America. Hay also shows how these disparate and mostly forgotten citizen groups challenged the political consensus and were able to shift government and industry narratives of chemical safety"--