

## “FOR THE GOOD OF MANKIND”

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What happens in this case — even if we restrict it to the American tests and eliminate the later French testing — is so clearly wrong, and violates so many principles and values that it is difficult to know where to begin. But I shall begin by focusing here on the effects of the tests on the people of Bikini. I shall conclude with a few words about the Cold War.

In the first place, I ask why the tests could not have been performed away from all human habitation. The siting of the tests in Bikini — only recently captured from the Japanese in the Pacific theater of World War II — seems to be part of an effort to move the tests as far away from centers of population as possible. But I just wonder whether the tests could have been performed in even more remote locations — for example, on the open sea. After all, the initial tests were performed in order to gauge their impact on ships at sea. The first test did this from the air, and the second test did this by detonating an atomic device below the surface of the sea. Bikini Atoll does not seem to me to be needed for this type of testing; perhaps huge aircraft carriers and other military ships could have provided a sort of “floating city” as well as contact with the outside world. But, on the other hand, it may well be that there were good reasons why this could not have been done, and good reasons behind the choice of an island or atoll in the Pacific. Here, it seems to me, the first choice would have been an uninhabited island or atoll. (In fact, once Bikini Atoll had been chosen for the test site — and then made uninhabitable during and after the tests — the Bikinians were re-located to uninhabited islands. The tests *made* Bikini uninhabitable. But there were already uninhabited islands — for example, those to which the Bikinians were re-located.)

But, in any case, once the choice to use Bikini had been made, there were responsibilities. I think there are at least two sorts of obligation

here, and the second one of these tends to be overlooked. The most obvious obligation is to the individuals of Bikini, the people who were greatly inconvenienced — and that they were “inconvenienced” is itself a severe understatement — and twice moved to other island locations, eventually ending up about 500 miles away. The less obvious obligation is the loss of the traditions of the Bikinians. These two are tied, but different. That an individual loses his or her cultural ties is one thing; and normally there are others in the culture who carry its ways on. The loss of traditions, on the other hand, is like the extinction of a species rather than the death of an individual: if a cultural tradition is lost, no one carries it on and it is completely lost.

In fact, a special feature of the Bikinian culture is that the people were rather like a very large extended family, and Bikini Atoll was their home. Many of the customs and traditions of the people were tied to specific locations in the atoll or on the main island (which is also called Bikini). To move these people in the way that they were moved amounted to treating them as things rather than as persons. It is as if the thought was that they could be “warehoused” either here or there, at the whim of the Americans. One interesting part of the story is that the Bikinian people were asked by the Americans whether they would be willing to make a temporary move — “for the good of mankind” — so that the U.S. could test weapons that would finally bring an end to world war. Their king decided that, yes, they would make this sacrifice. And the Bikinian family stood unified behind their king.

But suppose the Bikinians had simply refused to co-operate with their removal. Would the U.S. have forcibly evicted them from Bikini? We don’t know. We can only guess. But perhaps our guesses can be informed by the way in which the inhabitants of Rongelap were treated, when, unbeknownst to them (but known to American authorities), these people were exposed to high levels of radiation. Later, as it turned out, the people of Rongelap too had to be evacuated.

Early experience with atomic weapons showed U.S. scientists, military personnel, and others both that these were powerful weapons indeed and that it was in fact difficult to gauge just how powerful they were or could be. The knowledge of this uncertainty should have made the people who conducted the tests extremely careful — they knew that they did not know how powerful and damaging these explosions could be. They knew that they were not in a position to assure the people of Bikini that they could return safely to their home after a temporary absence.

One further question we might ask is why the atomic bomb was being tested in peacetime anyway. As part of the answer to this question, I suggest that the point is not so much that we were in peacetime but that we were in the early stages of the Cold War, and, as the later arms race showed, we were striving to outdo the Soviets. It could well be claimed that the Cold War began after Hiroshima, when the Japanese probably would have surrendered, but before the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, which was perhaps more a Cold War demonstration to the Soviets than a requirement for finishing World War II. The tests at Bikini and the Cold War (and the arrogance and stupidity that fueled them) eventually led to further deceptions and to the secret exposure of mainland Americans to radiation.

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