

NUCLEAR TESTING ON THE MARSHALL ISLANDS: A NECESSITY FOR THE U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY

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Professor Skoog has presented several interesting discussion questions regarding nuclear testing in the Pacific. My background may be unique to this topic in comparison to other commentators in that I served for 28 years in the U.S. Navy, with a mix of surface warship experience and politico-military experience. My sea-going experience included graduation from the navy's nuclear weapon school, thereafter serving as a Weapons Department Head on a destroyer responsible for nuclear rocket propelled depth bombs (ASROC). Additionally I served as an Executive Officer and Commanding Officer on several destroyers, all nuclear weapon capable.

I can confirm that I have "hugged" nuclear depth bombs as well as loaded and unloaded them on warships, but would like to refrain from stating which ships actually carried them. During my military service, I was involved in the two-man control and special authorization system for the deployment of the weapons. On account of my special role with these weapons, I was in what the military calls the "Reliability Program," in which all who had access to nuclear weapons had to belong. I also had to state that I was willing to use the weapons if properly ordered.

The Operation Crossroad's Bikini test in 1946 and subsequent tests contributed directly to the design of our warships and the design of the nuclear depth bombs we carried. Our surface ships were at a distinct disadvantage to nuclear powered submarines. The only really effective weapon we possessed against them was the nuclear depth bomb. Therefore, from my perspective and that of my peers, those weapons were an effective deterrent to war.

My shore duty experience was in strategy development, war planning, politico-military, arms control negotiations, and international relations. I handled everything, from grand global strategy down to Guam

and Micronesian affairs. For two years, 1975-1977, I was the Military Advisor to the U.S. negotiator for the Micronesian political status negotiations. In the late 1970s we were concerned about the transition of power when Leonid Brezhnev would die since the Soviets were at a peak in military power relative to the United States. The Soviet conventional war capabilities were significantly greater than those of the United States. The navy publicly testified before Congress that the navy was in the “grey zone of uncertainty, unable to predict victory over our most probable enemy — the first time since the War of 1812.” War game after war game showed that we would lose in a conventional war with the Soviets and would have to resort to the use of tactical nuclear weapons to defend Western Europe.

The only weapons that ensured peace were the nuclear weapons, both the tactical battlefield nuclear weapons in Europe and the strategic nuclear weapons providing Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). With the election of Ronald Reagan, we commenced a significant build-up of the conventional forces. The Soviets attempted to keep up, and collapsed economically in trying to do so.

It is interesting to note that Fleet Admiral William Leahy, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was strongly opposed to the use of the nuclear bomb against Japan, believing that an off-shore demonstration would be the most he could support. Not all military officers are right wing “bomb them back to the Stone Age” advocates.

My doctoral dissertation was on the decision-making regarding the postwar disposition of the Micronesian islands. The conventional wisdom throughout the 1940s and 1950s were that the Micronesians would not be capable of self-government “for at least 100 years.” They were not consulted at all in the decision of what to do with them after World War II. The military and Congress (and the American people by Gallup poll) wanted to annex the islands. The Presidents (Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman), pushed by the State and Interior Departments, wanted them to be a trusteeship under the umbrella of the United Nations. This issue caused FDR to create the State-War-Navy Committee to work out a compromise. This was the beginning of the National Security Council.

The compromise was the Strategic Trusteeship, falling under the United Nation’s Security Council, where the U.S. held a veto power, rather than under the Trusteeship Council, where the U.S. held no veto power. The terms of the specific agreement for the “Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands” written by the U.S., permitted the use of the trust ter-

ritory for strategic purposes by the U.S. The scope of authority easily included the testing of nuclear weapons. There has never been any question about the legal authority to conduct those tests in the Marshall Islands.

The prevailing feeling within the U.S. government was that the Marshall Islands provided the most effective location to test nuclear weapon effects on ships. Where else in the world would be better? The tests had to be over and under water. After Operation Crossroads, the value of Bikini and Enewetak were recognized for regular testing and they became the Pacific Proving Ground of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission.

It must also be remembered that the U.S. also conducted atomic tests in Nevada and New Mexico as well as in the Kamchaka Peninsula of Alaska. My next-door neighbor in Pennsylvania was a news reporter who witnessed an above-ground test in Nevada in the early 1950s. He died at a relatively early age (early 50s) of cancer, probably caused by the radiation exposure he received at that test. One naval officer is famous for putting a nuclear radiated piece of metal under his bunk after the 1946 Bikini tests, completely oblivious to the radiation danger. My point here is to suggest that the American leadership did not adequately recognize the dangers of fallout. They applied the same loose standards to the mainland as they did for the Marshallese.

In the 1960s we woke up to the dangers. We stopped testing in the Marshall Islands. We stopped testing above ground or in the water. We negotiated the above-ground test ban treaty with other nations.

On April 18, 1962, President Kennedy approved a National Security Council policy document, NASM No. 145, which stated that the United States must lead the Micronesians to self-government in such a manner that preserved American security interests (denial of the areas to others and military basing rights). JFK's administration was witness to the other trust territories becoming independent and the general move toward decolonization around the world. No longer would it be "at least 100 years" before the trusteeship agreement granting unprecedented security rights to the U.S. would be terminated. We ended in a race (which we lost) with Australia (New Guinea) to see which country would be the last in history to hold a trusteeship.

The matter of compensation for the radiation impacts became wrapped up in the political status negotiations which started in 1969. The Marshallese held out for higher and higher levels of compensation for the victims and higher and higher levels of payment for the continued

use of the Kwajalein Atoll missile-testing site, vital for testing inter-continental strategic missiles (and now the anti-ballistic missile tests).

This source of income for the testing site led the Marshallese to break away from the other island states to form their own country. The Marshallese saw no reason to share their wealth with the Phonpeans, Chuukese, Yapese, or Kosrians. The United States negotiators held the island groups together until 1977 when the effort collapsed following discovery of the CIA program in the islands. However, that's another story.

The recent consideration of using some of the Marshallese islands as nuclear waste dumping sites must be understood from the fact that the traditional leaders still control matters in those islands. The Kwajalein payments go to the Chiefs who then distribute them within their clans. The Chiefs, not the general population, are the ones thinking in terms of income generated by developing nuclear waste sites. They are not influenced by any fears of nuclear radiation.

Now, for some quick answers to Dr. Skoog's questions:

Yes, the United States could have been more responsible in anticipating potential harm to the islanders and the island ecology. However, the United States did not know the full extent of the potential harm. The U.S. treated the islanders and area the same as it treated the inhabitants of New Mexico and Nevada. As soon as the dangers were recognized (not like France) the U.S. government immediately stopped testing in the islands and has taken great effort to compensate the islanders and restore the land. Ethically, the U.S. government should be praised for treating the islanders the same as it treated Americans.

Yes, the testing was really necessary. It was the best-suited location for testing the effects of nuclear weapons on ships, from both airbursts and underwater bursts. These tests provided crucial information for our navy that helped preserve the peace in the Cold War.

Yes, the U.S. *did warn* the islanders to the extent that it was aware of the winds and the dangers inherent in the testing. The cold fact is that the U.S. officials did *not* know all that it should have known. But it did not willfully or knowingly neglect the safety of the islanders or the environment. The U.S. was not reckless in its testing.

Yes, the U.S. has done its best to compensate the islander victims and will, I am sure, continue to do so. The amount of money given to the Marshall Islands has led to the development of their economy which never would have been possible without the presence of the United States on their islands, and the money in compensation for the loss and suffering experienced by the islands (though itself unfortunate) has

enabled the people to develop their infrastructure to a level not possible before the tests.

Yes, the U.S. should take more of an active and responsible role in determining indirect contamination on such islands as Rongelap and Guam. The U.S. Government has already accomplished extensive testing of the sites and peoples directly impacted. Those tests are continuing. However, more should be done for Rongelap and Guam.

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