

## THE SILVER LINING OF HORROR: A DEVIL'S ADVOCATE'S POINT OF VIEW

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There can be little doubt regarding the devastating environmental impacts on the testing atolls of Bikini and Enewetak, as well as the tragic effects of the radioactive contamination of Rongelap and Rongerik, and to a lesser degree Uterik and Ailinginae, as a result of the Bravo thermonuclear test in 1954 (Simon 1997). Yet, a case can be made, that the contamination — in a perverse way — has been to the economic benefit of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI): it has provided the country with moral and political leverage far beyond its weight; and it has resulted in a boost for the local economy.

With copra, the traditional economic base of the islands (Spennemann 1992), at a low due to health concerns over polysaturated fats, and little other local produce or industry, the Marshall Islands economy falls into the MIRAB model (*MI*gration, *RE*mittances, *AID* and *BUREAUCRACY*) (Ogden 1994) and is thus heavily dependent on outside income sources. The compensation monies paid are the single largest revenue source apart from general grants under U.S. assistance.

The RMI government repeatedly used the issue of contamination, and the concomitant claim for reparations, as a means to ensure that the United States government paid not only financial compensation to the victims and their families, but also to the government as a whole. The moral pressure card has been played at every discussion on the Compact of Free Association. In the Compact of Free Association between the United States and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (1986), the U.S. accepted responsibility for compensation of the victims of nuclear tests and fallout related matters. To implement the provisions a Nuclear Claims Tribunal was established.

As of August 15, 2000, the Nuclear Claims Tribunal had awarded \$72,634,750 for personal injuries, and \$386 million to provide the

Enewetak people with “the just compensation to which they are entitled” (Marshall Islands Government 2000). In 2001 the Bikini people were awarded \$553 million.

Between 1986 and 2002 the U.S. also provided \$270 million in compensation payments and health care funding, the latter of benefit not only to the nuclear victims but the Marshallese population as a whole. The Bikini population alone received \$75 million (for 1989–2003), with \$2.4 million per annum paid on a per capita basis to the Bikinians, and another \$2.6 million per annum into a trust fund (Niedenthal 1997). The renegotiated Compact of Free Association (2003, section 177) provides for a further \$150 million, on a grant basis, *to the government* of the RMI over the period 2003 to 2018.

The per capita compensation of the Bikini population led to an unexpected side effect: families could increase their overall share by increasing the size of their family with a large number of children, which at the same time reduced the per capita payment. As a result, the population of Bikini descendants is proportionally growing faster than the population of other atolls. Traditionally the northern atolls were the poor relations of the populous and environmentally more diverse and horticulturally much more productive southern atolls. The influx of compensation monies has seen a reversal of this economic incline.

Further, in 1995 the Marshall Islands’ parliament amended the nuclear claims tribunal legislation to include all Marshallese citizens physically present in the Marshall Islands on or after 30 June 1946 (the date of the first test explosion), opening the door for claims presuming a “causal relationship between a presumed medical condition and the U.S. nuclear testing program” (Bill 232 of 1995, cited in Simon 1997).

While the impact on the four northern atolls has been accepted for quite some time, claims for a contamination of more southern atolls have been made more recently. These claims were based in part on genuine fear about contamination (after all the Rongelap contamination had long been ignored or down-played) and the desire to have a share in the compensation monies handed out to affected Marshallese. The recent claims by citizens of other islands in Micronesia are just a natural extension of this.

To assess the extent of the radiological contamination of the entire nation, the Marshall Islands Nationwide Radiological Study was carried out, directed by Dr. Steven L. Simon, and under the guidance and peer review of an international panel of experts. The study had *inter alia* the mandate to “establish the geographic extent of fallout radioactivity

throughout the Republic of the Marshall Islands and to determine the present and future levels of radioactivity” (Simon & Graham 1995; Simon & Graham 1997). The study showed that four atolls (Enewetak, Bikini, Rongelap and Rongerik) had levels of radioactivity elevated to such a degree that the islands use should be restricted. Wotje Atoll and the atolls further north, showed very localized elevated levels of radioactivity, suggesting localized fallout, in particular Caesium-137, which was deemed to have sufficiently decayed to be of no concern with the total annual dose rate below the WHO recommended limit of 100 mrem (Simon & Graham 1995). The atolls to the south of Wotje had negligible or no localized fallout. The government of the Marshall Islands rejected the findings of the Nationwide Radiological Study, a study which the government itself had funded (Nitijela Resolution n° 151 of 1995; Simon 1997).

From another perspective, the nuclear testing in the Marshalls has also created a unique cultural heritage ensemble: the sunken fleet on the bottom of Bikini Lagoon. Sunk during the first two tests of Operation Crossroads in 1946 or scuttled thereafter, there are now nineteen ships, among them one aircraft carrier (USS *Saratoga*), a battleship (USS *Arkansas*), some destroyers (one Japanese), two submarines and the Japanese battleship *Nagato*, flagship of Admiral Yamamoto’s strike against Pearl Harbor (Delgado *et al.* 1991). With the signing of the Compact of Free Association in 1986 these ships became the legal property of the RMI (Agreement 1992). As a collection, these ships are a unique assemblage both from a nautical heritage point of view and as a reminder of the nuclear testing period. Located in depths accessible to recreational and advanced divers, these ships, particularly the USS *Saratoga* as the sole accessible underwater wreck of an aircraft carrier, have become a tourist attraction for divers, similar to the Japanese merchant fleet in Chuuk Lagoon (Lindemann 1982). The site is actively promoted by the Bikini Local Government (Niedenthal 1997; BLC 2003). The economic spin-offs from the dive tourism involve the local carrier Air Marshall Islands, dive operators, hotel accommodation on Majuro and local businesses.

As tragic as the issue of nuclear contamination has been for the affected individuals and their families, it has been a boost for the Marshallese economy. One has only to look to Kiribati, its neighbor to the south, to appreciate the economic implications of the nuclear compensation monies.

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