The Controversy of Operation Crossroads: A Post-WWII Nuclear Weapons Test

Foreword

In the mid 1940s, my grandfather, Commander Larry Condon, witnessed the testing of three-nuclear powered atom bombs. Although all of his war stories have interested me in the past, upon learning of this particular experience, I became fascinated with the subject—especially given one particular comment he made when describing the explosions to me: "It was beautiful. Just beautiful." It seemed remarkable to me that anyone could call an atom bomb exploding at the destructive capacity of millions of sticks of dynamite "beautiful."

I decided to look into it, and upon researching the topic, I discovered that thousands of other sailors witnessing similar spectacles also joined in with my grandfather in admiration and astonishment at the explosion—but never fear. Not once did I find a comment relating how worried the witnesses were that they were in danger. Quite frankly, such blatant ignorance of danger on such massive a scale made me want to discover exactly what it was that had caused the ignorance. Was it a naïve navy? Misleading scientists? A government cover-up?

Then I read of Operation Crossroads, which involved the detonation of two atom bombs on the island of Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, the two detonations dubbed Operation "Able," an aboveground test, and Operation "Baker," an underwater test. I found that the navy had well-informed scientists who warned them of the danger, and yet the tests continued anyway, and that President Truman, whether he was misinformed, manipulated, or on a power trip, had, regardless, promoted the tests at Bikini Atoll.

Sincerely,

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Abstract

Brett M. Condon in his paper, "The Controversy of Operation Crossroads: A Post-WWII Nuclear Weapons Test," describes the post World War II tests of the atom bomb on the island of Bikini Atoll and the shocking mistakes made by the U.S. government and Navy during the tests. He shows that both the sailors involved in the tests and the societal public were deceived and abused by the government through misinformation, lies, ignored warnings, and persisted nuclear weapons testing after it was clear such testing was both dangerous and lethal to thousands of innocent Americans. Condon also proves that the U.S. government, whether misinformed, naïve, or simply on a power trip, is to blame for the loss of nearly 30,000 lives in these little-known tests at Bikini Atoll, and that the government did not cease such deadly experimentation with radioactivity even after such losses.

THE CONTROVERSY OF OPERATION CROSSROADS: A POST-WWII NUCLEAR WEAPONS TEST

On July 1, 1946, shortly after the conclusion of World War II, a naval B-29 bomber dropped an atom bomb on the surface of the island Bikini Atoll in an operation dubbed "Able." Twenty-four days later, another atom bomb was dropped by a B-29 into Bikini's lagoon, sporting over 90 anchored and then abandoned naval vessels, in an
operation dubbed "Baker." 42,000 naval sailors on over 150 support ships witnessed the tests, and at a mere 10 miles away in the case of Baker (Radio Bikini). The entire event, sanctioned by the U.S. government to test the effects of radiation on ships, equipment, and material, and well publicized by radio, television, and video recording worldwide, was referred to as "Operation Crossroads." A fitting name, for a crossroads this test most certainly was for the U.S. government.

President Truman was given the choice between a future of responsible nuclear testing, a careful age of learning and educated appreciation for the awesome power of the atom bomb, or, an age of nuclear negligence and lax experimentation with a dangerous and, at the time, unpredictable power. Operation Crossroads saw the United States government straying sadly toward the later choice. It is unmistakably true that the government enthusiastically promoted the post-World War II nuclear weapons testing at Bikini Atoll, however, they did not clearly inform the sailors participating in the tests of the dangers of the tests, nor did they heed warnings from qualified naval scientists for the safety of the sailors. The government's reckless tests at Bikini exposed all 42,000 sailors to lethal doses of radiation, of which nearly 23,000 died and close to 10,000 suffered serious bodily injury as a direct result (Institute of Medicine, 64). Perhaps Truman was manipulated, misinformed, or even a little naive. But at some point his actions as President, a man responsible for the well-being of millions of Americans, must be examined objectively, the results of which speak for themselves. Whether or not the President intended for it to happen, over 20,000 sailors died, and just as the CEO of a corporation is legally liable for the negative actions of one of his employees, so must the President bear the responsibility for the tests conducted by the U.S. Navy.

Reckless Testing

Naval Negligence In a sense, the sailors involved in the Crossroads tests were asked to commit suicide. It can safely be assumed that most would have quickly declined, but the sailors at Bikini were not given a choice in their mortality. In the disquieting documentary "Radio Bikini," directed by Robert Stone, John Smitherman, a naval veteran involved in the tests, remarked in an oral interview, "We really and truly didn't know what was going on because we were told it was a test […] do what you're told and there won't no harm come to any one." My grandfather's comments on the subject echo Smitherman; he never considered himself in any danger. Sailors involved in the tests had no idea about the dangers inherent in such a test-that radiation kills. Naval officials did not caution the men or convey the purposes of the test to the sailors. In fact, the officials were so vague that most sailors treated the tests as a sort of vacation. One sailor recalled, "Everyone was in a good attitude […] we thought it was wonderful how they were treating us-all the ice cream you could eat […]" (Radio Bikini). Essentially, sailors were fed some ice cream and told to keep their noses out of where they didn't belong. They were never warned of the danger.

After the detonation of two atomic bombs powerful enough to again annihilate Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Navy proceeded to withhold information on the condition of Bikini's now radioactive lagoon. In the 1994 Oversight Hearing before the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations discussing this issue, M. W. Boyer, an authority presenting factual data before the House of Representatives submitted "[…] Gordon Dean, the AEC chairman […] suggested that the AEC provide no information on the fish in the lagoon" (25). Gordon's reasoning was due to the fact that the scarce few fish that had actually survived the tests were certainly radioactive and would be a health hazard; thus, it would be difficult to repopulate the island with the natives they had previously evicted (Radio Bikini) if the natives were to understand the new, radioactive, condition of their once-pure lagoon. Gordon's self-preserving attempt at a cover-up was clearly deceptive in nature and sadly, but very accurately, reflects the attitude and behavior of the entire U.S. Navy during the Crossroads tests.

Along the same lines, although the Navy had a clear understanding of the dangers of Operation Crossroads-after all, they had already dropped two atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki before they conducted these tests-and received notable warnings from their own scientists, they chose to ignore them. M. W. Boyer also submitted to the Congress in 1994 that, "Stafford Warren, Operation Crossroads's radiological safety (or radsafe) director, warned that Baker would cause severe contamination in the lagoon and that the target ships 'may remain
dangerous for an indeterminable time thereafter,' but these warnings were ignored" (Oversight Hearing, 15). Furthermore, despite roentgen readings of twice the lethal dosage in the lagoon after the tests, 15,000 men on 49 different support ships were ordered to enter the lagoon 41 minutes after detonation. (Oversight Hearing, 16).

Public Ignorance and Presidential Atrocities The navy was not the only source of problems for the doomed sailors. A shocking indicator of how little the general public understood the horror of the nuclear tests is evident upon viewing Figures 1 and 2:

As recorded by A. Costandina Titus in his book Bombs in the Backyard, pictures of nuclear explosions were chosen as "picture of the week" in Life magazine and were later turned into postcards (Titus, 120. See Figure 1). But what is worse, a little girl on a parade float entitled "Our Little A-Bomb" actually won first prize in the 1953 Western Parade, in St. George, Utah (Titus, 125. See Figure 2).

It seems logical that in the case of such a unique event as deadly and significant as the Operation Crossroads, that the President would inform the public of the severity of the situation, and yet the public attitude toward the tests doesn't reflect that. Perhaps President Truman was misinformed or lacked sufficient information to understand the implications of Operation Crossroads. Yet, Glen Cheney, author of They Never Knew, wrote that, "atomic testing had started in the Marshall Islands because President Truman had considered such explosions too dangerous to take place on American soil" (35). This information indicates that President Truman understood the potentially disastrous implications of Operation Crossroads if he refused to allow it to take place "on American soil." Yet, the public never appeared to understand the danger or the severity of the situation, as shown by their parades and postcards glorifying mass-destruction.

Still more disturbing is that even after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and despite all the horrific first-hand experience being garnered from the Crossroads and Baker tests, the President of the U.S. authorized radiation testing on human subjects. Cheney relates:

Bombs were not the only source of government-issued radiation. In the mid-1940s, in a highly secret program, for purely experimental purposes, the U.S. government injected eighteen human subjects with plutonium. […] Apparently only one of the subjects was informed of the experiment, and even he probably had no idea of how dangerous it was. (Cheney 83)

This sort of behavior should be considered absolutely unacceptable of the President of the United States—the sole country wielding nuclear power at the time. What kind of example was the U.S. setting to the rest of the world?

Inadequate Justification

Naval Ambiguity The Navy's excuses for its behavior ranged from outright denial to absolute ridiculousness. Veterans suffering from the effects of these tests found it nearly impossible to secure medical benefits because "records were either not kept very carefully or [were] perhaps even deliberately falsified, and the military denied any possible links between the tests and the health problems that occurred years later" (Cheney 61). In Cheney's same investigation into the subject he discovered an actual excuse utilized by the Navy: George Seabron, for example, had helped decontaminate target ships after both the Able and Baker tests. On the trip back to the United States, he recalls, many sailors were very sick. They were told it was sea sickness, which seemed odd for professional sailors. (60)

It is highly unlikely that nearly 42,000 men were suddenly, coincidentally seasick after having participated in Operation Crossroads. It is more likely that their symptoms of "sea sickness" were, instead, a direct result of being exposed to the incredible amount of radiation that contaminated, as presented before the Oversight Hearing, every single non-target ship (over 150) involved in the tests (Oversight Hearing, 17).
The most ironic aspect, perhaps, of the entire situation was the comment made by James Forrestal, the Secretary of the Navy, regarding safety measures: "None will enter the area until it is declared radioactively safe […] we are taking every precaution to be certain that no man will be injured in any way as a result of this experiment" (Radio Bikini). It is improbable that a sailor such as John Smitherman, whose legs and right arm eventually swelled to the size of his waist before literally exploding and who eventually died of cancer, would agree that "every precaution" was assuredly taken, and that no man, indeed, was injured due to these tests (Radio Bikini).

**A Specious Administration**
The navy was not alone in their misleading behavior concerning the Crossroads test. The presidential administration under Truman sought to sell the American public on nuclear testing. Titus recalls that they told the public that the risks were minimal and "are indeed a small price to pay for the preservation of democracy" (Titus 70). The administration appealed to America's love of democracy, implying that if you support democracy, then you, of course, support atomic weapons testing as well. This is a logical fallacy, but it isn't the last they used. President Truman also said in a national press conference, "We will use it [the atom bomb] in His [God's] ways, for His purposes" (Radio Bikini), appealing to God as the highest, unquestionable authority figure when, in fact, who is he to say what God would do? Simply because I believe in God doesn't mean that I must then support Truman's interpretation on how (or even if it is a good idea) to use the atom bomb.

The president also proposed programs to study radiation that would appeal to the public and give the appearance that he was carefully considering the issue and assuredly learning from the tests. William J. Schull, a geneticist of the University of Texas Health Science Center recorded in his book, *Effects of Atomic Radiation*, that Truman's administration "[…] suggested to President Harry Truman that he issue a directive to initiate a long-term study of the medical and biological consequences of exposure to atomic radiation," (Schull, 19) in an attempt for the presidential administration to appear both responsible and thoughtful. However, despite the smoke being blown from the presidency, this accomplished nothing. Perhaps scientists did, indeed, gain an extensive knowledge on the effects of radiation on humans, but this didn't change Presidential policy or stop the administration from continuing testing and continuing to expose Americans to lethal doses of radiation. Studies continued in Nevada, and as documented by Raye C. Ringholz in his book *Uranium Frenzy*, over 4,000 miners in Washington were exposed to radiation even after the tests at Bikini (197).

**A Lesson To Be Learned**

The United States government should never have performed the tests on Bikini Atoll. The study by the Institute of Medicine, investigating the mortality of veteran participants in the Crossroads nuclear test, made one point especially clear: that whatever information was garnered from the tests is insufficient to justify the eventual death of 22,847 unsuspecting naval sailors (Institute of Medicine, 64). The sailors did not have a clue of what was happening nor the danger they were in. If they had been told what could happen to them by being exposed to radiation and that they could very well (and many did) end up like John Smitherman, they undoubtedly would have refrained from participation. Just before he died, Smitherman made this comment: "No doubt in my mind that from those days on the Bikini Islands, it's been nothing but a slow death since then […] maybe some of them were worse than I was [legless, arm swollen to the size of his leg, soon thereafter to die of cancer], and many of them didn't know what killed 'em" (Radio Bikini).

I add my voice to a quote from Robert Milliken's *No Conceivable Injury*, a study on British nuclear testing in Australia, where it states, "[t]he public has a right to know at what point scientific knowledge ceases to be conjecture and at what point subjectivity replaces science" (Milliken, 329). In the case of the Crossroads test at Bikini, I think it is obvious that whatever benefit the scientific information that was ultimately garnered by American scientists might have had for the United States, it was not worth the death and additional injury to tens of thousands of sailors. It is evident that these naval sailors were uninformed of the danger of Operation Crossroads, and that warnings that could have saved lives were ignored in the pursuit of scientific data.
I firmly believe that each individual's right to life is infinitely more important than any government's pursuit of a destructive power, and whether or not President Truman could have claimed ignorance had he been placed on trial for the actions of his administration is irrelevant. Our former President Thomas F. Jefferson, a Founding Father with a clear vision for this country, once remarked, "Ignorance [...] is no excuse."

Bibliography


