Reassessing America's Nuclear Tests in the Marshall Islands

Analyses of the United States’ nuclear policies are often influenced by the historical memory of the Cold War. In hindsight, American testing of nuclear weapons appeared to bring about more problems—political, social, cultural, environmental, and physical—than they sought to solve. Moreover, American scientists and politicians were portrayed as reckless and callous, conducting atmospheric tests with deleterious effects. Yet, by failing to analyze the historical context surrounding these tests, the traditional historiography, as philosopher Keith M. Parsons and physicist Robert A. Zaballa argue, “inevitably lead[s] to facile judgements” and skewed narratives. For Parsons and Zaballa, only by recognizing America’s early Cold War nuclear tests “as causes and effects of their time,” one can gain a complete understanding of American policy (p. 3). Thus, in their monograph, Bombing the Marshall Islands: A Cold War Tragedy, Parsons and Zaballa provide a detailed examination of the events surrounding the series of nuclear tests known as “Castle Bravo,” 1946-58, to fill this historiographic gap.

Using archival sources from the Lewis L. Strauss archive, Parsons and Zaballa assert that throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, American policymakers believed nuclear war was not only probable but also entirely winnable. Military strategists envisioned the next nuclear war as an extension of the United States Air Force's Second World War strategic bombing campaign, a type of war in which the superiority of American weaponry would surely win. Therefore, Parsons and Zaballa continue, atmospheric nuclear testing “was simply an unremarkable corollary and extension” of Cold War policy (p. 148). If American policy argued that nuclear war was possible, then it became necessary to test the tools of war, even if it could affect the Marshall Islands and the Marshallese. Only with the introduction of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) in the 1960s did American policymakers and strategists begin to view nuclear warheads as deterrents rather than as usable weapons.

While Parsons finds the “Castle Bravo” tests to be an obvious extension of Cold War policy, he concludes that the post-Cold War critiques of nuclear testing also correlates with human beings’ tendency to shift between two poles of ethical thinking, what philosophers categorize as either “consequentialist” or “deontological.” For Parsons, early nuclear strategy is indicative of consequentialist thinking. The real and imagined threat of a
growing Soviet Union resulted in the American government choosing a policy that focused on “saving those who can be saved and, ruthlessly if need be, leave others in danger when the effort to save them would likely result in disaster for all.” Once the threat of the Cold War subsided, the consensus shifted toward deontological thinking, toward a more self-critical assessment of the “justice or fairness” of the country’s previous policies (p. 148).

_Bombing the Marshall Islands_ is, as the authors aptly describe, a “scholarly popular history,” a book that is as equally understandable for the lay reader as the graduate student (p. 8). Parsons and Zaballa helpfully include two appendices, one describing the science behind atomic/nuclear weapons and the other examining the effects of radiation exposure, to help the reader understand the science behind nuclear war. However, the authors’ discussion of America’s use of atomic bombs during the Second World War in the concluding chapter is a bit misplaced and would have worked better as an introduction. In the end, Parsons and Zaballa’s interdisciplinary approach successfully marries science and the humanities to provide an in-depth examination of the “Castle Bravo” nuclear testing and a greater historical context for the United States’ early Cold War nuclear policy.

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