

*Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at Bikini Atoll*, by Jonathan M Weisgall. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994. ISBN 1-55750-919-0, xvii + 415 pages, maps, photographs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. US\$31.95.

Jonathan Weisgall is a Washington lawyer who has represented the people of Bikini Atoll for almost twenty years. Here he gives us the definitive account of the atomic explosions that started it all: Able and Baker, the two tests at Bikini in July 1946. Not only are Able and Baker a watershed in the history of international relations, ushering in the postwar nuclear age, they are also a dividing line in the history of the Bikinians and the Marshallese people in general. Before the 1946 tests, the Bikinians were a remote atoll community scarcely noticed by their chiefs or by successive German and Japanese colonial administrators; since the tests, and others that followed in the 1950s, their lives have revolved around exile, dispersion, and compensation.

Although Jonathan Weisgall has played a vital role in gaining compensation for the Bikinians, they are not the focus of his book. Instead, he wants to tell us all there is to know about the origins, execution, and outcome of Operation Crossroads, and in the process to throw light on the political life of the United States at the very beginning of the cold war. With thirty-two excellent photographs, chosen from the thousands taken by the Joint Task Force, and an impressive list of unpublished sources and interviews, *Operation Crossroads* is a superbly detailed investigative account of the

events of 1946. Weisgall shows that the origins of the tests lie more in interservice rivalry in the armed forces and in military disputes about air power than in a desire to intimidate the Russians, though President Truman was happy to show the world America's monopoly of atomic weaponry.

*Operation Crossroads* is a book about America, not a study in Pacific history. It depicts Washington at the height of America's economic, political, and military power in the twentieth century, at a time when the fate of a few hundred Pacific Islanders was a mere bagatelle in official calculations. "Primitive they are," said the *New York Times* of the Bikinians, "but they love one another and the American visitors who took their home" (114). The contrast between the scale of Bikinian society and that of the United States could hardly have been greater. In a massive feat of organization, the Americans brought 41,963 men and 37 women to the Marshall Islands. Bikini briefly had its own radio station. The target fleet that was assembled in the lagoon to be bombarded by atomic explosions consisted of ninety-five ships, themselves constituting the world's fifth largest navy.

Navy Commodore Ben H Wyatt, the military governor of the Marshalls, was the man who had the task of asking the Bikinians to leave and who kept the cameras rolling through seven or eight takes of the ceremony of farewell in March 1946, when *Iroij* Juda was supposed to say that his people were happy to depart. "Juda," comments Weisgall, "kept repeating that everything was in God's hands, so

Wyatt finally gave up" (113). The Bikinians were not happy to leave, but they had no choice in the matter. Wyatt's specialty was to appeal to the Marshallese in the language of the Christianity to which they had been converted. In a speech to the people of Rongelap and Wotho, who were temporarily evacuated to Lae Atoll, he explained that America was developing something that was "as effective as the pillar of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night. That something was in the hands of the great wise men of America. These men worked in their laboratories in America, quietly saying nothing, but working out the secrets of God. And under His guidance, out of that study came the atom bomb," which would be available for the Americans to employ "if in future any nation attacked the peoples of God."

The secrets of God in 1946 turned out to be two explosions of 23 kilotons each, about the same yield as the bomb dropped the previous year on Nagasaki. Observed, or rather not observed, by correspondents and others wearing goggles that were ten times too dark, the Able test was promptly labeled a flop by those who had been indulging in apocalyptic fantasies about what might happen, such as the inundation of the western coast of the United States. But when *New York Herald Tribune* journalist Stephen White filed his report on the second test, an underwater blast, he told his editor not to cut the superlatives. The first wave created by Baker was 94 feet high. Baker was the test that did long-term radioactive damage to Bikini. It threw up a gigantic column of radioactive water and spray

that covered the target ships and exposed numerous young American sailors to contamination as they clambered aboard too soon afterward. It was, as Weisgall says, America's Chernobyl, and its reverberations are still being felt almost fifty years later.

The things that now matter most to many Bikinians are annual distributions from the Nuclear Claims Trust Fund, compensation for medical claims, the Department of Agriculture Food Assistance Program, and the Four Atoll Health Care Program. Where once they ate the fresh food of the atoll, the Bikinians now eat white rice, white flour, canned fish, pancakes, and donuts that come from the Americans. Some suffer from diabetes and obesity. Young people aspire to the American way of life they see on videos. There is talk of a new future for Bikini in the form of an atomic theme park that would attract scuba divers for weekends spent exploring the wrecks sunk in the 1946 tests. Another possibility, some say, is for the Bikinians to become truly rich by making their homeland available for the dumping of nuclear waste. The long-term legacy of 1946 for the Bikinians has been profound. They have entered the modern economy with a need for outside assistance striking even by Pacific Island standards.

*Operation Crossroads* brilliantly tells the story of the events that set the Bikinians on the road to nuclear dependence.

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