

The Nuclear Age in the Pacific Islands

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The study of nuclear testing in the Pacific by French scholar Jean-Marc Regnault is to be welcomed. But there are a number of areas where I would place a different emphasis to explain the sources of resistance to French nuclear and colonial policy in the region.

From the beginning of the nuclear age, indigenous peoples of the Pacific have borne the brunt of nuclear weapons testing by France, Britain, and the United States. Seeking “empty” spaces, the western powers chose to conduct Cold War programs of nuclear testing in the deserts of central Australia or the isolated atolls of the central and south Pacific. But these regions were not “terra nullius,” and a central feature of planning for nuclear testing was a casual racism toward the indigenous inhabitants of the region.

A striking example comes from planning documents for the 1957 British nuclear tests at Christmas and Malden Islands, code-named “Grapple.”¹ In November 1956, a British military report outlined possible radiation dosages for people near the Grapple nuclear tests. In the racist terminology of the time, the report notes:

For civilised populations, assumed to wear boots and clothing and to wash, the amount of activity necessary to produce this dosage is more than is necessary to give an equivalent dosage to primitive peoples who are assumed not to possess these habits. . . . It is assumed that in the possible regions of fall-out at Grapple there may be scantily clad people in boats to whom the criteria of primitive peoples should apply.²

A meeting held a week later agreed to inform the UK defense minister that “independent authorities agree that. . . only very slight health hazard to people would arise, and that only to primitive peoples.”³

Understandably, the “primitive peoples” of the Pacific were not impressed by British attitudes to their safety. In 1957, the Indo-Fijian newspaper *Jagriti* noted: “Nations engaged in testing these bombs in the Pacific should realise the value of the lives of the people settled in this part of the world. They too are human beings, not ‘guinea pigs.’”⁴

This quest for human dignity underlies the emotion shown in regional opposition to nuclear colonialism. Many other examples can be drawn from the US, British, and French programs. The interconnection of racism, colonialism, and the nuclear era is fundamental, and blaming the “Anglo-Saxon powers” for leading anti-nuclear sentiment against France downplays the depth and range of opposition to nuclear testing in the Islands.

Anti-nuclear protests from the Islands predated French plans to transfer testing from the Sahara to Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls, a process that Regnault so ably documented in his 1993 book *La Bombe française dans le Pacifique*. In a 1999 speech,⁵ the late Marie-Thérèse Danielsson reminded us that there were anti-nuclear protests in French Polynesia dating back to 1950, when Tahitian nationalist Pouvanaa a Oopa collected signatures for the Stockholm Peace Appeal.

In 1956, after the UK government announced that nuclear testing would proceed at Christmas Island, Western Sāmoa petitioned the United Nations Trusteeship Council to halt the tests (at the time, Sāmoa was still a trust territory of New Zealand). The same year, the Rarotonga Island Council submitted a report to the Cook Islands Legislative Council, expressing concern and asking “that the testing area be situated at some greater distance than the Cook Islands.”⁶

Regnault’s references to Australia and New Zealand as “Anglo-Saxon powers” opposed to French nuclear policy are puzzling. In fact, it is Australia’s Anglo-Protestant establishment, from Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies in the 1950s to current leader John Howard, who are the most enthusiastic supporters of nuclear doctrines promoted by Paris, London, and Washington. Canberra can hardly be accused of encouraging Islanders to oppose the Bomb—in the 1950s, the conservative Menzies government supported the UK testing program in Australia, allowed the mining of uranium for nuclear weapons programs, and actively supported Britain’s imperial folly as they rushed to test a hydrogen bomb in the Pacific before the 1958 international moratorium on nuclear testing.

Just as puzzling are the claims that religious opposition to nuclear testing derives largely from the Protestant churches (for example, it is stressed

that New Zealand's David Lange is a "strict Protestant," and Vanuatu's Walter Lini an Anglophone and Anglican priest). But there was a diversity of opposition to French testing, which included people from many denominations and faiths. How do you explain former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, a self-proclaimed "tyke" of Irish Catholic heritage? Keating is a Francophile and a collector of antique French clocks, but a strident critic of France's nuclear and colonial policy. Leading Catholic figures such as Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara of Fiji, Bishop Patelisio Finau of Tonga, or Jean-Marie Tjibaou of New Caledonia were outspoken critics of French policy in the 1970s and 1980s, inspired in part by Catholic teachings on war, peace, and social justice.

I would argue that religious inspiration often ranked lower than a sense of place, the feeling of being people *of* the Pacific, not just *in* the Pacific. That sense of belonging—of looking to the skies, seeing the Southern Cross, and feeling at home—underlies much of the regional opposition to France's nuclear policy (and this emotion against "outsiders" from Paris rings just as true in Australia and New Zealand as in the Islands).

Regnault describes the creation of the South Pacific Forum and suggests that it was "an institution within which independent countries could address their development priorities." But from 1947, it was the South Pacific Commission (SPC) that focused on development. Leaders such as Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Albert Henry, and Hammer de Roburt created the Forum in 1971 because the colonial powers refused to allow "political" issues to be discussed at SPC meetings. Early Forum meetings did cover development topics (trade, telecommunications, education, and more), but political issues like nuclear testing and political independence drove the independent Island leaders to meet separately from the colonial powers.

Mara's autobiography stresses the "ban on political discussion" at the South Pacific Commission, noting that "France was the most insistent on this, probably on account of its own vulnerable position in the Pacific, because of both its overseas territories there and its nuclear-testing programme at Mururoa Atoll. Economic and social issues *oui*, politics, *non*" (Mara 1997, 170).

Regnault argues that "Wellington and Canberra led a hostile campaign against France" in the Forum. But I believe this overstates the role of Australia and New Zealand, which often followed rather than led the opposition within the Forum (especially from the Melanesian Spearhead Group).

The 1985 signing of the Rarotonga Treaty for a South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ) was preceded by unilateral initiatives by Pacific Islands nations: Palau's long struggle to create a nuclear-free constitution; Vanuatu's 1983 declaration of nuclear-free status; Fiji's early nuclear ships ban (later overturned) and the anti-nuclear sentiment manifested at the founding of the Fiji Labour Party.

The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone is presented by Regnault as the culmination of a "new crusade," supposedly developed from "the early 1970s under the leadership of New Zealand." But as Michael Hamel-Green has documented (1990), Labour parties in Australia and New Zealand discussed proposals for a nuclear-free zone beginning in the 1950s, sparked by US and British nuclear testing and plans to establish the North West Cape submarine communications base in Western Australia. Australia's Labour Party formally called for a Southern Hemisphere nuclear-free zone in 1962, before the French testing center was established.

The Rarotonga Treaty was certainly negotiated in the context of anger over French nuclear testing, the Kanak independence struggle, and the 1985 bombing of the *Rainbow Warrior*—an act of state terrorism by French intelligence agents (Robie 1986). But the limits of the SPNFZ Treaty were influenced by US strategic needs in a period of heightened US–Soviet confrontation. The treaty has a number of loopholes created to protect US missile testing and nuclear ship visits—original drafts were weakened after lobbying by Australia, acting on behalf of its ANZUS ally. The Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau are not parties to the treaty, even though they are now Forum members. The three Micronesian countries have not signed the SPNFZ Treaty because of potential conflict with US defense requirements under the compacts of free association (especially the development of missile defense systems at Kwajalein Atoll).

To understand the anti-nuclear movement in the Pacific and anger over the resumption of French nuclear testing in 1995–1996, it is important to look at the broader canvas of global campaigns for disarmament. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union raised hopes of a peace dividend and moves toward the abolition of nuclear weapons. In the early 1990s, there was a range of initiatives to map out a path to comprehensive disarmament—the Canberra Commission initiated by the Keating Labour government in Australia; unilateral nuclear disarmament by post-apartheid South Africa and post-Soviet Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan;

and the World Court project (a citizens' movement seeking a ruling from the International Court of Justice on the threat or use of nuclear weapons).

At the May 1995 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty conference, the nuclear powers only obtained an indefinite extension of the treaty by agreeing to move rapidly toward negotiations on comprehensive nuclear disarmament. President Chirac's decision a month later to resume nuclear testing was not simply a slap at the countries of the Pacific, who reacted with fury.⁷ Rather, it was a calculated decision to disrupt the global movement for nuclear abolition, which would threaten France's position as a midsized global power and a member of the UN Security Council.⁸

Chirac's flurry of tests in 1995–1996 reopened Pandora's box, and we are still living with the consequences: India and Pakistan testing weapons in 1998; Washington's plans for simulated computer testing of a new generation of "useable" nuclear weapons; Russia and China expanding technologies to overwhelm US missile defense systems, after the US abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty; North Korea, Iran, and other official enemies decried as proliferation threats, or partners with non-state groups seeking nuclear or chemical weapons capacity. The alleged development of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein's regime became the pretext for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, even though neither weapons nor operating programs were found after the US occupation of the country.

Regnault suggests that after the end of French testing in 1996, Forum countries have moved on, and "it is no longer the nuclear threat that concerns them." But the Pacific Islands Forum continues to reiterate support for nuclear disarmament. On the international stage, Pacific Island governments have lobbied in support of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and Fiji was the first nation in the world to ratify the treaty in October 1996. At recent Forum meetings, Island leaders have encouraged all Forum members to attend Conferences on Facilitating the Entry into Force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. Forum members host monitoring stations to support the global verification regime under the treaty.⁹ Among many other topics, the 2003 Forum communiqué discusses nuclear proliferation in Korea, radioactive contamination in the Marshall Islands, and nuclear waste transports through the region.

Anti-nuclear sentiment is still strong among Pacific church, community, and citizens' groups, such as the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement. Although nuclear testing in the Pacific has ended, there are still many nuclear concerns in the region: proposals to dump nuclear waste on

isolated atolls; uranium mining on indigenous peoples' land; and the testing of a new generation of missile defense and satellite systems, which threaten the militarization of space. France itself has not "moved on": in 2002, the French government increased its expenditure on nuclear weapons by 13 percent.¹⁰

Many Islanders are opposed to the shipment of nuclear wastes through the Pacific Ocean. Over twenty tonnes of Japanese plutonium is stockpiled in France after reprocessing of wastes at La Hague. French corporations like COGEMA—with government support—join with Britain and Japan to transship plutonium, MOX (mixed oxide) fuel, and high-level radioactive wastes through the two-hundred-mile Exclusive Economic Zones of Pacific nations. Opposition to these nuclear transports has been repeated in every Forum Communiqué over the last decade. It is New Zealand and Australia who have tried to moderate Island anger over the failure of the three shipping nations to negotiate over issues of safety, liability, and compensation in case of accidents (MacLellan 2002).

Most importantly, indigenous communities in the Pacific are still living with the social, economic, and environmental aftereffects of fifty years of nuclear testing.¹¹ Through the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement and the Paris Network on Nuclear Testing, people from affected nations have increased their campaigning in the last few years: Fijian soldiers and sailors seeking compensation for the effects of nuclear tests at Christmas Island over forty years ago; the lobbying of Moruroa e Tatou, which links the former nuclear workers from Moruroa and Fangataufa; Australian veterans of the atmospheric tests at Maralinga, Emu Field, and the Monte Bello Islands campaigning for pension rights from the Australian and British governments; and the Marshall Islands government lodging a "changed circumstances" petition to the US Congress in 2000, seeking to increase the level of compensation provided by the United States for damage to people and property caused by US nuclear tests (OBSARM 2002).

These campaigns have common demands, calling on the nuclear weapons states:

- to acknowledge their responsibility for the health and environmental impacts of past nuclear tests;
- to introduce or extend programs for monitoring, cleanup, and rehabilitation of former nuclear test sites;

- to open up their archives to allow independent researchers access to documentation and studies on the health and environmental impacts of testing;
- to compensate former test-site workers, and civilian and military personnel at the sites, and neighboring local communities;
- to continue long-term funding for the necessary programs of monitoring, cleanup, rehabilitation, compensation, and reparations.

Regnault is correct in saying that regional concepts of security extend beyond nuclear issues and are tied to broader notions of economic, social, or environmental vulnerability. But despite this, questions of militarization and disarmament are important. The presence of nuclear and military installations in the Islands is intimately linked to the history of colonialism in the region and the reliance by small states on aid and investment from northern hemisphere powers.

Regnault suggests that “the French presence in the Pacific has found new justification since recent developments” such as political crises in Melanesia. The French government is currently basking in the sunshine of improved relations with Pacific governments. But today’s balmy weather can change quickly to a winter of discontent. In a decade, New Caledonia will come to the end of the Noumea Accords process, Bougainville will be nearing the end of its ten-year autonomy transition, and West Papua’s independence movement will be on the boil. The issue of self-determination and political independence will not disappear from the regional agenda, in spite of waning international attention on the eradication of colonialism (Corbin 2000).

France has ongoing interests in the region—the vast maritime resources of 7 million square kilometers of Exclusive Economic Zone, the fourth largest reserves of nickel in the world, and a strategic role as a midsized global power with territories in every corner of the globe. But the Preamble to the 1998 Noumea Accord says “Decolonisation is the way to build a lasting social bond between the communities living in New Caledonia today” (quoted in Maclellan 2002b, 90). If the French State reneges on its commitment to the decolonization process, the “French presence in the Pacific” will be challenged again.

Given their experience of fifty years of nuclear testing, most Pacific citizens strongly support nuclear disarmament. Through the United Nations, Pacific Island governments have taken strong stands in support of a com-

prehensive arms control regime. But within the Islands, the actual nuclear infrastructure—military and intelligence bases, missile testing facilities, and satellite monitoring installations—have yet to be removed. A truly independent and nuclear-free Pacific is still to be created.

Notes

1 This draws on research for *Kirisimasi*, the oral history of Fijians involved in the 1957–1958 British tests (Tubanavau-Salabula and others 1999).

2 “Danger Area,” paper from Grapple Task Force Commander Air Vice Marshall Wilfred E Oulton marked “Top Secret—Guard,” 19 November 1956, Number GRA/TS.1008/1/Air. (For other UK military documents, see Tubanavau-Salabula and others 1999, 15–17).

3 Minutes of meeting on 27 November 1956 marked “Top Secret—UK Eyes Only,” XY/181/024.

4 Editorial in *Jagriti*, 20 February 1957, quoted in Lal 1992, 158.

5 Speech to the 8th Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) Conference held at Arue, Tahiti, in 1999—the first time that NFIP had been granted visas to hold a conference in the French territory in twenty-five years. See PCRC 2000, 18.

6 For details, see Tubanavau-Salabula and others 1999, 8–10.

7 Opinion polls in Australia showed 96 percent disapproval of the resumption of nuclear testing at Moruroa in 1995—an unprecedented unity across the political spectrum.

8 For a detailed argument on this point, see Maclellan and Chesneaux 1998, chapter 6.

9 To support monitoring of CTBT breaches, Fiji, Cook Islands, and Papua New Guinea host both seismic and radionuclide stations, while Kiribati and Palau have radionuclide stations, and Sāmoa and Solomon Islands have an auxiliary seismic station. France maintains such stations in New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

10 Details of the costs and consequences of France’s ongoing nuclear program are available in a series of books by Bruno Barrillot of the Center for Documentation and Research on Peace and Conflicts (CDRPC) in Lyon (Barrillot 1996, 1999, 2002).

11 The United States conducted 25 tests at Christmas Island (not 13) in 1962 (not 1963), and 23 tests at Bikini (not 42), plus 44 at Enewetak (not 60), for a total of 67 in the Marshall Islands. The British conducted 9 atomic and hydrogen bomb tests at Christmas and Malden Islands (not 10, and not all were thermonuclear). The British nuclear testing at Christmas Island took place during 1957–1958 (not 1957–1963), though the United Kingdom maintained a presence

at the base until June 1964. For detailed data on US and UK nuclear tests at Christmas Island, see Tubanavau-Salabula and others 1999, 199–200. For US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, see Niedenthal 2001, 93–94.

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