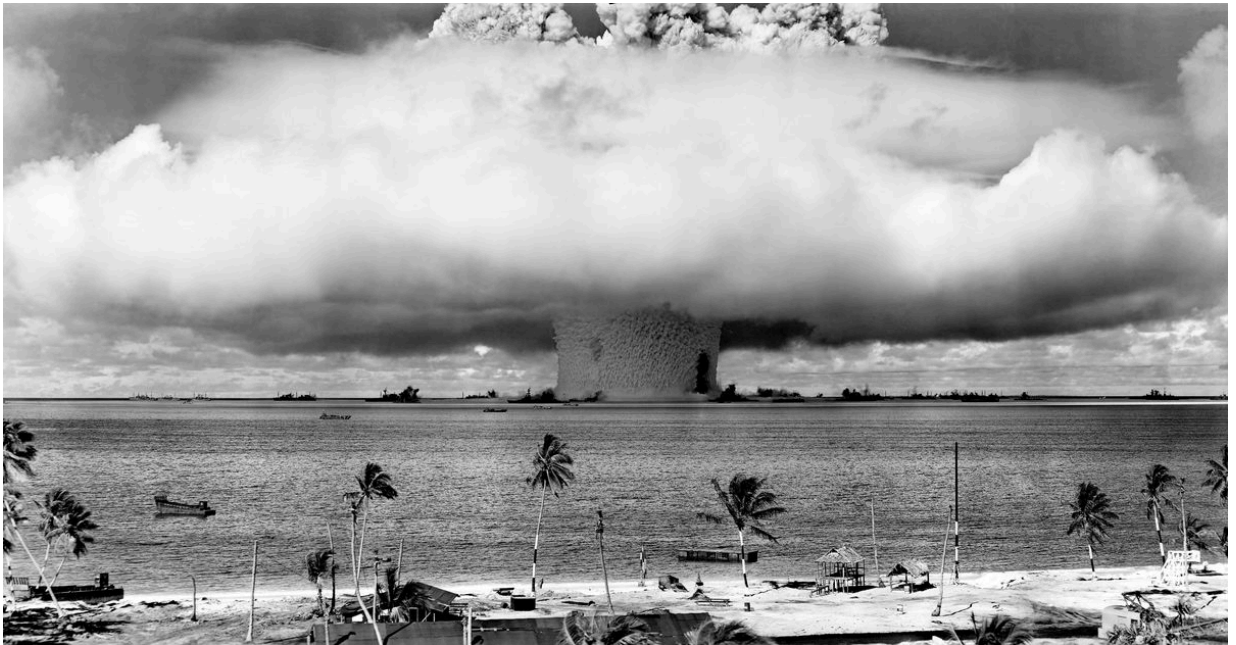


It's The 70th Anniversary Of The Castle Bravo Nuclear Test

Reflections on a time when we didn't know what the hell we were doing.

By [Charles P. Pierce](#) PUBLISHED: MAR 01, 2024 9:23 AM EST



Pictures from History // Getty Images

One of my favorite e-mail correspondents is the National Security Archive at The George Washington University in D.C. These guys specialize in bringing to light the hidden

archaeology of the Cold War. Their latest is a dossier on Castle Bravo, the disastrous 1954 H-Bomb test on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. From the dossier:

The Bravo detonation in the Castle test series had an explosive yield of 15 megatons—1,000 times that of the weapon that destroyed Hiroshima and nearly three times the six megatons that its planners estimated. The detonation vaporized some ten million tons of sand, coral and water that turned into a 100-mile-wide fallout cloud spewing radioactive debris on the inhabitants of Marshall Island atolls, U.S. military personnel, and Japanese fishermen aboard the Lucky Dragon...Bravo's fallout necessitated the evacuation of over 230 people from Rongelap, Rongerik, and Utirik atolls (all part of the U.S. trusteeship for the Marshall Islands), including 28 U.S. military personnel on Rongerik. The people of Rongelap had the greatest exposure to radioactive contamination. When the toxic cloud arrived at Rongelap, located about 110 miles from the test site, the fallout looked like snow; children played with the irradiated flakes while others kept working on outdoor tasks. The immediate health effects were serious and long-lasting, and Rongelap became uninhabitable.

There was the bomb that all of us were afraid of nuclear fallout, and that got rural families laying in canned goods into the root cellar.

In addition, 23 Japanese fishermen aboard the Lucky Dragon (Fukuryu Maru) were sickened by radiation exposure, and the subsequent death of one crewman helped bring international media attention to the

dangers of nuclear fallout. U.S.-Japan relations were further roiled by a general sense of panic about potentially radioactive tuna, among other things, and the damage that such a perception could cause to Japanese exports. The health effects on the crew and the people of the Marshall Islands and concerns about the economic impact of the Bravo radiological disaster strongly influenced world opinion against nuclear testing, helping to spark a movement that ultimately led to the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty.

JFK's last triumph.

The dossier is chillingly precise about how shot through with hubris braced by a kind of willful ignorance the U.S. nuclear program was.

According to the recollections of Merrill Eisenbud, who was the director of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission's (AEC) Health and Safety Laboratory in New York, "there was a very, very influential group of people, both among the military and civilians, who insisted that there never was any ... fallout" from the Ivy Mike test. Thus, when the AEC "recommended an evacuation capability ... this was denied [by the military] on the basis that it wasn't necessary; that there would not be any fallout." [See Document 43] Speaking to such failings, Wellerstein wrote that Castle Bravo is a "cautionary tale about hubris and incompetence in the nuclear age," where scientists and military officials detonated "a weapon whose size they did not know, whose effects they did not correctly forecast, whose legacy will not soon be outlived."

One of the scientists in the dossier recalled the headlong race for the bigger boom-boom, and he summed the whole thing up quite admirably: “*We Didn’t Know What the Hell We Were Doing.*” No wonder everybody in my generation grew up neurotic.



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