Bikini Atoll Is Not A Beer: Pacific Islanders Speak Out

Laray Polk

Banner outside the Manhattan Project Beer Company, a brewery operating in a warehouse space in Dallas, Texas. A taproom is coming soon. (Photo: Laray Polk)

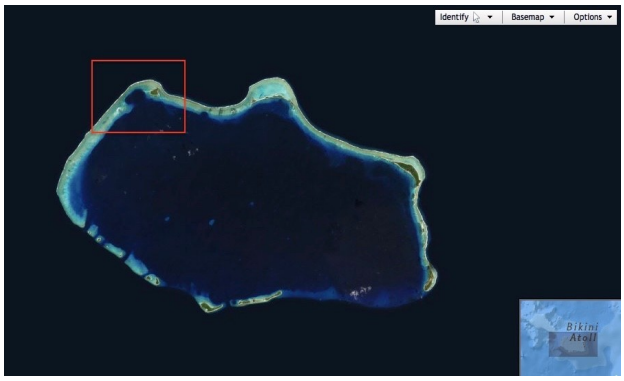
Pacific Islanders are speaking out after a Texas-based company, the Manhattan Project Beer Co, named one of its handcrafted beers, Bikini Atoll. Based on news coverage and responses on social media, people around the world are listening. An online petition (https://www.change.org/p/jeff-bezos-stop-the-sale-of-manhattan-project-bikini-atoll-beer-at-whole-foods) asks CEO Jeff Bezos and other distributors to stop selling Bikini Atoll. It currently has 6,000 signatures. On Aug. 15, the Marshall Islands National Nuclear Commission (NNC) released an official statement (http://inkstickmedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Manhattan-Project-Beer-Companys-Release-of-_Bikini-Atoll-Beer_.-.pdf) calling on the Manhattan Project "to engage in dialogue with the people of Bikini to hear directly from community members about their reactions to their product."

NNC's attempt at outreach and media attention in major outlets (*Time, Vice, AP, Navy Times, Honolulu Civil Beat*) appears to have had no impact on the company's decision to shut down the conversation. On Aug. 13, the Manhattan Project posted a statement (https://twitter.com/mpbeerco?lang=en) on social media to say it will not move off the name. It also contains a somewhat contradictory claim. The company says that through its brand and naming, it is "creating awareness of the wider impacts and implications of the United States's (sic) nuclear research programs and the pivotal moment in world history that is often forgotten." For exiled Bikinians, and others living in the Marshall Islands, it's doubtful that "the wider impacts and implications" of the Manhattan Project or its successor, Operation Crossroads, will ever be forgotten. Between 1946 and 1958, the U.S. military conducted 67 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands.

In an open letter addressed to one of the company's co-founders, Marshall Islands Health and Human Services Secretary Jack Niedenthal made the following appeal: "As a nation, the people of the Marshall Islands have one of the highest cancer rates in the world, all of our families can tell a personal cancer story that often times can be traced directly to the nuclear testing…On their behalf, and on behalf of the people of the Marshall Islands, I highly encourage you to discard this ill-conceived product forever, and moreover, I believe you need to issue a public apology to our people."

Niedenthal confirmed by email that the

company has not responded to his letter of Aug. 15.

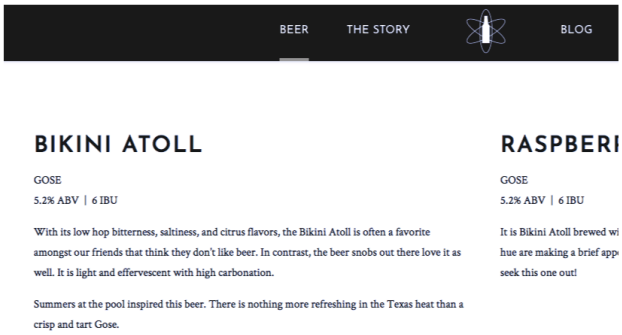


Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The red box indicates the location of the permanent mile-wide crater created by the Castle Bravo shot on March 1, 1954. Denotation of the 15-megaton thermonuclear device (H-bomb) had an explosive yield equivalent to 1,000 Hiroshimas. Radioactive fallout contaminated the Marshallese people and their islands, 23 Japanese fishermen, and 28 American military personnel. (Map: NOAA)

The Manhattan Project's continued refusal to listen to what Pacific Islanders have to say raises several questions. First, is the company legitimately engaged in building awareness through its nuclear-based nomenclature or is this mostly a marketing ploy? Second, if it's the latter, what types of cultural conditioning might account for its unwillingness to listen and learn from people who live with the consequences of U.S. nuclear testing? The answer to the first question can be ascertained by comparing the company's stated intent with its marketing materials posted online.

The Power to Name

According to the company's website, "summers at the pool" inspired the beer named Bikini Atoll. Elsewhere on the site, Bikini Atoll is interchangeably handled as a beer; a place; and a possible tourist destination.



Screenshot from the company's website (s.v. "Beer Menu").

The illustration above, minus the color swatches, appears on the beer can for the company's product, Bikini Atoll. Screenshot from the company's website (s.v. "Blog").

One poster-size illustration on the website's blog (not shown) features a photograph of a beer, Landsat imagery, and the words, "Welcome to the Beautiful Islands of Bikini." The same phrase appears on a sign posted on the actual Bikini Atoll, though the "welcome"

comes with a warning. Below the salutation is stenciled, "50 Years of Bravo Bomb." Bravo is the H-bomb detonated in 1954 that created a permanent mile-wide crater in Bikini's northwestern reef.

Sign on Bikini Atoll, "Welcome to the Beautiful Islands of Bikini." (Photo: Ron Van Oers/UNESCO)

On the webpage "Our Story," the company explains how it arrived at its peculiar nomenclature: "The group decided to formalize under the name Manhattan Project, given our creative, collaborative, experimental, and scientific approach to beer making (not to mention the plethora of cool beer names like Half-Life and Superfortress)."

Taken as a whole, the marketing materials tip the balance in favor of style over substance. While the name Bikini Atoll is tantalizing, especially when paired with images of a tropical paradise as seen from space, what sorts of associations would be stirred if the company had named its beer "Chernobyl" or "Fukushima?" Rhetorical questions along these lines can go on forever once trapped in the logic of nuclear-based nomenclature. The second question, in regard to cultural conditioning, is far more difficult to analyze because it requires a willingness to penetrate familiar narratives that have historically been told *defensively*.

Manufacturing the Atomic Age

Since the beginning of the U.S. nuclear program—an era often referred to by its manufactured name, the "atomic age"—generations in the U.S. have grown up in a desensitized (and desensitizing) culture as it concerns the real and ominous threats of nuclear war and prolonged testing. Some of the conditioning is intentional, and akin to social engineering. Other conditioning can be attributed to the casual consumption of an "atomic aesthetic" found in low- to high-brow illustration; nomenclature; automobile and furniture design; household goods and apparel; tourist attractions, cartoons, and so on.

It is hard to say where one form of conditioning begins and the other ends.

The ubiquitous image of an atom, for example, did not originate from design culture, but from a structural model developed by Niels Bohr, the founder of atomic physics. Bohr helped develop nuclear weapons at Los Alamos then warned the world post-detonation, "We are in a completely new situation that cannot be resolved by war."

Bohr's atomic structure assimilated into logos. The top image is a screenshot from the museum's website. Among the museum's "best-known artifacts" are replicas of Little Boy and Fat Man. The bottom image shows the company's use of a beer bottle as the atom's nucleus. (Photo: Laray Polk)

Nuclear Positivity

One place to look for engineered conditioning is in the "messianic word-pictures" of William L. Laurence, a science reporter for the *New York Times*. In the spring of 1945 Gen. Leslie Groves, director of the Manhattan Project, enlisted Laurence as "a special consultant." Groves wanted "a journalist with the credibility of the *Times* to shape America's first learnings about the bomb." Laurence agreed to infuse his regularly published articles with a particular slant, as well as write press releases for the U.S. Government.[1]

In this dual role, he didn't disappoint. He was the only reporter to have access to Los Alamos, the scientists, and the Trinity detonation. He described the mushroom cloud from the Trinity blast as "a gigantic Statue of Liberty, its arm raised to the sky, symbolizing the birth of new freedom for man." His purple prose, which often included biblical references, could be described as "nuclear positivity." That is, finding the sunny side of A-bombs by focusing on the scientific genius of individuals and "present[ing] uranium as a friend to mankind." [2]

Laurence's influence can be detected in Pres. Harry S. Truman's speech delivered sixteen hours after the bomb dropped on Hiroshima: "It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East."

Geographical Remoteness

U.S. nuclear testing conducted in remote areas of the Pacific Ocean represents another form of conditioning, mainly because it creates physical and psychological distance from the destructive power of nuclear weapons. And, of greatest consequence, it has the potential to isolate people suffering from radiation poisoning—indigenous populations and U.S. servicemen alike—from the world's view and by extension, the world's concern.

Remote areas with small populations were targeted for testing by design. A few weeks after the U.S. dropped bombs on Japan—Hiroshima, Aug. 6, and Nagasaki, Aug. 9—plans were already underway for nuclear testing, this time under the purview of the Navy. As early as October, officers in the Navy's new OP-06 Office of Special Weapons "just took out dozens of maps and started looking for remote sites."[3]

Site selection had to meet certain criteria. The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) told Congress "tests should be held overseas until it could be established more definitely that continental detonations would not endanger the public health and safety." Sites also had to be a U.S.-controlled territory and in a climatic zone with "predictable winds and free from storms and cold temperatures." According to Vice Adm. Blandy,"It was important the local population be small and co-operative so that they could be moved to a new location with a minimum of trouble."[4]

U.S. military planners selected Bikini Atoll on Dec. 21, 1945.[5]

Medical Misinformation

Another form of conditioning, or desensitization, can be attributed to the U.S. legacy of secrecy and medical misinformation that developed in tandem with the nuclear weapons program. This legacy began shortly after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as the "U.S. military moved quickly to squelch all news of radioactivity."[6]

One of the first targets of censorship was an Australian reporter, Wilfred Burchett. U.S. officers expelled him from Japan and confiscated all of his photographs, though he did manage the publication of one story (https://hibakushastories.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/The-Atomic-Plague.pdf) abroad. It was published in the London *Daily Express* on Sept. 5, 1945. It is an exceptionally potent story because Burchett walked the streets of Hiroshima, interviewed Japanese doctors, and visited hospital wards where he saw people dying who had no visible injuries. His story begins with a single sentence: "I Write This as a Warning to the World."[7]

Groves expressed fear about on-the-ground reporting in a telephone conversation on Aug. 25. He told a physician at the Oak Ridge Hospital that news airing on Radio Tokyo had the potential to generate sympathy for the Japanese people. The physician advised him to "get some big-wig to put a counter-statement in the paper."[8]

Less than three weeks later, a report by William L. Laurence appeared on the front page of the *Times*. His main source of expert opinion is Groves, representing the U.S. Army. Near the end of the report, under the heading, "Foe's Propaganda at Work," Groves cast doubt on the Japanese claim that "people died from radiations." If true, he remarked, "the number was very small."[9]

"Where Next?"

Two months after the U.S. detonation of the Castle Bravo hydrogen bomb at Bikini Atoll, the Marshallese people sent a petition (https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb459/docs/doc%2010A%20%20Marshall%20Islands%20petition%20dec%20files%2050-54%20(1).pdf) to the UN: "We, the Marshallese people feel that we must follow the dictates of our consciences to bring forth this urgent plea to the United Nations." The lethal effects of the Bravo test, the petition explains, "have already touched the inhabitants of two of the atolls in the Marshalls, namely, Rongelap and Uterik, who are now suffering in various degrees from 'lowering of the blood count,' burns, nausea and the falling off of hair from the head, and whose complete recovery no one can promise with any certainty."

The Marshallese weren't only fearful of the deadly weapons; they were concerned about "the increasing number of people who are removed from their land." This passage expresses why:

> Land means a great deal to the Marshallese. It means more than just a place where you can plant your food crops and build your houses; or a place where you can bury your dead. It is the very life of the people. Take away their land and their spirits go also.

Ultimately, it would take international efforts to understand what had gone wrong with the Bravo test, and what health impacts were to be expected. The work of Japanese scientists (https://apjjf.org/2019/17/Okuaki.html) and a collaboration between Joseph Rotblat and Yasushi Nishiwaki brought to light an accurate assessment of radioactive fallout from the test, which in turn instigated an international effort to ban the hydrogen bomb and above ground testing. Rotblat, it should be noted, was the

only scientist to walk away from the Manhattan Project.[10]

Concluding Thoughts

The people of the Marshall Islands are not strangers to the legacy of secrecy and medical misinformation associated with U.S. nuclear testing, and their letters to the Manhattan Project Beer Co. are merely the most recent (and least consequential) expression of frustration in a prolonged campaign to have their voices heard. If the Manhattan Project were to decide to change course in naming its beer after Bikini Atoll, it would be a small gesture of goodwill with big dividends. Otherwise, the company is perpetuating a familiar pattern consistent with nuclear colonialism.

Between 1946 and 1958, the U.S. military conducted 67 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands. The U.S. conducted 23 of these tests at Bikini Atoll, and 44 near Enewetak Atoll. The image above shows the first 10 seconds of the Baker test, detonated at a 3.5 mile distance off Bikini Atoll. (NARA, Still Pictures Unit, Record Group 374-ANT, box 5, folder 23 "Detonation")

Laray Polk is an American writer and artist. In 2013, she co-authored a book with Noam Chomsky, *Nuclear War and Environmental Catastrophe* (Seven Stories Press). The title has been translated into Spanish, French, Turkish, Italian, and Japanese (http://www.kadensha.net/books/2014/201406hukuzatsukasurusyakai.html) (Kodensha).

Notes

[1] Tom Zoellner, *Uranium: War, Energy, and the Rock That Shaped the World* (New York: Viking, 2009), 84-87.
[2] Ibid., 80-81. According to Zoellner, Laurence did more "than anyone in history to present uranium as a friend to mankind" through his two jobs as "stenographer for the War Department" and "top science reporter for the nation's most influential newspaper."
[3] Jonathan M. Weisgall, *Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at Bikini Atoll* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 32.
[4] Ibid., 31.
[5] Ibid., 329. See "Bikini won out," n. 45, ch. 3, 329.
[6] Zoellner, 90.
[7] Ibid., 89-90.
[8] Download the complete transcript of the telephone conversation between Gen. Groves and

Lt. Col. Rea here (https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB162/76.pdf).
[9] William L. Laurence, "U.S. Atom Bomb Site Belies Tokyo Tales: Tests on New Mexico Range Confirm That Blast, and Not Radiation, Took Toll," *New York Times*, September 12, 1945.
[10] Laray Polk, "Lucky Dragon," *CounterPunch*, April 5, 2007.