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'Nuclear Savage': A powerful new documentary on U.S. hydrogen bombs

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

Recently, I saw a powerful, disturbing new documentary about the U.S. hydrogen bomb explosions in the islands in the South Pacific, the U.S. government's campaign to keep the indigenous people on those contaminated islands and the U.S. government's secret program to monitor the effects of radiation on them.

"Nuclear Savage: The Islands of Secret Project 4.1," a film by former Greenpeace activist Adam Horowitz, uses recently declassified government film footage of the hydrogen bombs we dropped in the South Pacific and recent interviews with survivors to tell this nightmarish nuclear tale.

In old black-and-white footage, we see excited white, U.S. military men speaking somberly into the camera about the glories of the hydrogen bomb and describing how well "the savages," his term for the people of the Marshall Islands, were responding to our nuclear bomb explosions. The combination of militarism, U.S. imperialism, nuclear weapons, environmental destruction, sheer racism and total disregard for these gentle, impoverished people is shocking, to say the least.

Of course, the real savages are the Americans who built and dropped these bombs and who maintain our nuclear weapons industry today.

Sixty-seven U.S. hydrogen bombs were exploded in the 1950s in the Marshall Islands -- the equivalent of more than 7,000 Hiroshima bombs. They vaporized several small islands, poisoned the land and sea, destroyed natural life and caused immeasurable suffering to thousands of people across generations, bringing thyroid cancer, genetic defects, miscarriages and various other illnesses.

"Nuclear Savage" demonstrates how the U.S. government used the Marshall Islanders as human guinea pigs for more than three decades to study the effects of radiation sickness. As I watched the film and heard the heartbreaking testimony of the islanders, I kept thinking how the U.S. military doctors resembled the Nazi criminal doctors who experimented on human beings. Then, at the end of the film, we're shown footage of the Nazi doctors, and are told clearly how the U.S. military violated U.S. law, international law, the Nuremberg Principles and Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that "no one shall be subject without his free consent to medical or scientific experimentation."

The largest U.S. hydrogen bomb explosion was the March 1, 1954, Bravo Test. Unlike previous explosions, the U.S. did not evacuate residents of the Rongelap and Rongerik atolls. Residents were told their islands were safe, then suffered direct exposure to nuclear fallout and serious health consequences that linger to this day. Later, they were relocated to another island.

At the nuclear labs in Los Alamos, N.M., U.S. government officials launched their top-secret "Project 4.1" to monitor the effects on the Marshallese people. In 1957, the residents of Rongelap were returned to their beloved paradise island and told again that everything was safe. In fact, their atoll was severely contaminated. U.S. doctors were brought to the island and ordered not to treat the people medically, but to study them so the government could learn more about the effects of nuclear fallout on human beings. As the years went by, more and more people became seriously ill and never received serious treatment.

Over several decades, the U.S. organized 72 "research" trips to the Marshall Islands to "study" 539 Marshallese men, women and children who suffered the effects of radiation. As the decades passed, the sick Marshallese complained to the doctors, the military and the government, arguing that their worsening illnesses were related to the U.S. hydrogen bomb explosions. They were told there was no such connection and no need to evacuate Rongelap.

After watching this documentary, author Barbara Rose Johnston, a leading research fellow at The Center for Political Ecology, wrote:

The U.S. knowingly and willfully exposed a vulnerable population to toxic radioactive waste as a means to document the movement and degenerative health outcomes of radiation as it moves through the food chain and human body. This human subject experiment extended over the decades with profound consequences for individual subjects and the Marshallese nation as a whole. The Marshallese have become a nation whose experience as nuclear nomads, medical subjects, citizen advocates and innovators is shared by many citizens, communities and indigenous peoples around the world. Their experiences, consequential damages, and their struggles to restore cultural ways of life, quality of life, intergenerational health, and long term sustainability, are especially salient to a nation and to a world concerned with the lingering, persistent, and invasive dangers of nuclear [weapons and power]. ... There is a moral and legal obligation for the United Nations community to assist in the remediation, restoration and reparation due to the environment, health, and dignity of the Marshallese nation. International attention to this history and experience is long overdue, and sadly and sorely relevant to a post-Fukushima world.

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In the mid-1980s, after decades of complaint, Greenpeace came to the rescue, boarded all the residents of Rongelap onto the Rainbow Warrior, and took them from their still-contaminated island to Ebeye, another

island, where they remain today, living in crowded slums in total poverty. Recently, the U.S. bought off the Marshall Islands for \$150 million and sealed our military presence for the next 75 years. Here's how journalist Robert Koehler described the situation in his review for The Huffington Post:

Nuclear Savage is the story of what we did to the Marshall Islanders throughout the Cold War with our nuclear testing program. Not only did we expose many thousands of them to ghastly -- often lethal -- levels of radiation with 67 nuclear blasts, with glaring evidence that at least some of the exposure was intentional, done for the purpose of studying the effects of radiation on human guinea pigs; not only did we wreck the Marshall Islanders' way of life and pristine paradise, creating a nation of internal refugees confined to a Western-style slum on the island of Ebeye; not only did we cower, as a nation, from any real responsibility for what our fallout did to these people, settling our genocidal debt to them with \$150 million "for all claims, past, present and future"; but also, throughout our dealing with them as nuclear conquistadors, we displayed a racism so profound, so cold-blooded, its exposure must forever shatter the myth of American exceptionalism.

And we're still doing it. The tiny, impoverished Republic of the Marshall Islands recently signed a 75-year lease agreement with the United States, guaranteeing that the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on Kwajalien Atoll, where Star Wars testing is still being conducted (for unfathomable billions of dollars), will be operational at least through 2086.

"Nuclear Savage" is one of the most powerful films I have ever seen. I urge everyone who cares about our world to see it. We may feel powerless to do anything, but we need to learn about the evil our nation has done and hear the testimony of the powerless victims of our nuclear savagery.

Of course, the United States should dismantle its nuclear weapons and bombs, close Los Alamos, get rid of nuclear power, make massive reparation to the Marshallese, end the insane Star Wars program and ongoing Vandenberg nuclear tests, and clean up the world from our radioactive waste. This film tells the truth about ourselves, about our nuclear savagery, and calls us to repent of our nuclear violence and do what we can for the Marshallese, the environment, disarmament, human rights and justice, that one day we might have a world without hydrogen bombs and war.

John Dear will speak today at Springfield College in Springfield, Mass., and lead a day of reflection, "Peace and Justice Rising!: On the Resurrection Accounts of Jesus" on Nov. 9 at the Call to Action conference in Louisville, Ky. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire*. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*; *Put Down Your Sword* and *A Persistent Peace*, are available from Amazon.com.

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