"Only as Dust in the Face of the Wind": An Analysis of the BRAVO Nuclear Incident in the Pacific, 1954

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On the morning of 1 March 1954, the United States detonated a thermonuclear weapon named BRAVO at its proving grounds on the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands.¹ Within one minute, this bomb produced a huge fireball, created a massive crater in the coral reef, and stripped the nearby islands of all vegetation. The energy released by the explosion was equivalent to 15 million tons of TNT.²

BRAVO is significant to the history of American-East Asian relations for a number of reasons. First, it was the largest thermonuclear test ever carried out by the United States.³

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1. Between 1946 and 1958, the United States conducted at least sixty-six nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands. Of these, twenty-three were exploded at Bikini Atoll and forty-three at Enewetak Atoll; seventeen of the sixty-six were thermonuclear (or hydrogen) weapons. The total explosive power of these tests was equivalent to 107,000 kilotons of TNT. The Marshall Islands are comprised of twenty-nine atolls and five separate reef islands in the Central Pacific Ocean. The total number of islands exceeds 1,200 and the total land mass is approximately seventy square miles. The islands are located 2,400 miles southwest of Hawaii. See Oversight Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Natural Resources, House of Representatives, 103rd Cong., on "Radiation Exposure from Nuclear Tests in the Pacific," Serial No. 103-68, 24 Feb. 1994, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Oversight Hearing), 24, 217, 229, 241; U.S. Department of Energy, United States Nuclear Tests: July 1945 Through September 1992, DOE/NV-209 (Rev. 14) (December 1994), 1–8. Of course, the United States was not the only nation which carried out nuclear explosions in the Pacific. France has been responsible for an estimated ninety-three underground and forty-two above-ground tests since 1963 in the South Pacific atoll of Moruroa. Great Britain carried out a dozen atmospheric explosions in Australia and at least twelve on Christmas Island between 1952 and 1958. See Jane Dibblin, Day of Two Suns: U.S. Nuclear Testing and the Pacific Islanders (London, 1988), 202.

2. "Report Prepared by the Defense Nuclear Agency for the Department of Defense," 1 Apr. 1982, DNA 6035F, Castle Series 1954, National Archives II (hereafter cited as NA II), College Park, Md. According to this report (p. 205) the fireball was three miles in diameter and the crater in the atoll was one mile across and two hundred feet deep. Within ten minutes, a cloud formed that was sixty-five miles wide.

powerful than the atomic bomb that leveled Hiroshima, BRAVO released an unprecedented amount of radioactivity into the atmosphere. Second, new information suggests that the immediate and long-term effects of the explosion were more destructive than previously acknowledged by the U.S. government. In addition to the environmental damage caused by BRAVO, twenty-three Japanese fishermen, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Marshallese were seriously harmed by the shot. Third, the BRAVO incident reveals much about U.S. foreign policy objectives during the Cold War. In the race against the Soviet Union for nuclear supremacy, the protection of the Marshallese and Japanese was not a high priority for American decision-makers. A central assumption behind the explosion was that U.S. national security was more important than the health and safety of the peoples living and working near the proving grounds. Fourth, BRAVO illustrates the growing influence of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) in the Eisenhower administration. The agency was responsible not only for conducting the test, but also for developing various public relations strategies to protect the U.S. nuclear program in the Pacific. In cooperation with the State Department and other bureaucracies, the AEC downplayed the destruction caused by the explosion; it also provided misleading information about the effects of the blast. Although these tactics helped the Eisenhower administration maintain domestic support for the testing program, they contributed to serious strains in U.S. relations with Japan and the Marshall Islands. In addition, these public relations ploys made it very difficult for the peoples of the Pacific to gain recognition for their plight and compensation for the damage caused by BRAVO.

Despite its significance, this test has not been the subject of much historical inquiry. In his early work, Blowing on the Wind, Robert Divine analyses the public debate that took place in the United States over nuclear testing during the years from 1954 to 1960. In the background chapter to this book, Divine includes some information about BRAVO and its effects. At the time that he was writing, however, most of the relevant official documents remained classified and he relied largely on published books, journal articles, and newspapers.

The BRAVO test is discussed briefly in several other works but only one paper by Roger Dingman, entitled "Alliance in Crisis," fo-