

Domination and Resistance: The United States and the Marshall Islands During the Cold War

Martha Smith-Norris

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While anthropologists and, increasingly, scholars in disciplines such as environmental studies have attended to the Cold War politics of the United States in the Marshall Islands, historians of the Cold War have tended to focus elsewhere. Historian Martha Smith-Norris's *Domination and Resistance: The United States and the Marshall Islands During the Cold War* is a welcome addition to the interdisciplinary conversation examining the unequal power dynamics between Marshall Islanders and the United States. As the applied anthropologist Holly Barker notes in her 2003 *Bravo for the Marshallese: Regaining Control in a Post-Nuclear, Post-Colonial World*, the superpower status of the United States (US) came at the expense of Marshallese lives and livelihoods, which were regarded as expendable (xi). *Domination and Resistance* chronicles the actions taken by the US to develop and defend its strategic interests in the Marshall Islands, and the actions taken in turn by the Marshallese to gain self-government and redress for the damage caused by US bomb and missile testing. Smith-Norris, agreeing with Barker, argues that the US has still not adequately compensated the Marshallese for the consequences of its strategic policy during the Cold War, a conclusion borne out by Smith-Norris's extensive compilation of evidence.

As Smith-Norris points out, the Marshallese sought self-governance very early in the era of US control. The Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands was established by the United Nations (UN) in 1947. It was the only one of eleven Trust Territories designated as a "strategic area," and therefore the only one whose trusteeship agreement was managed by the Security Council rather than by the General Assembly. Because the US had the power on the Security Council to veto any action it deemed threatening to its security interests in the Trust Territory, it exerted a thorough and secretive control, keeping out other interested powers such as the Soviet Union and developing its own strategic interests without interference.

By 1949, Marshall Islanders were resisting, pressing for a Marshall Islands congress. Smith-Norris traces the US-Marshall Islands relationship from that early point through the first rounds of nuclear testing and human radiation research, through the later intercontinental ballistic missile testing and the re-homing of islanders to their atolls, finally bringing the story up to 1986's Compact of Free Association. Throughout, she emphasizes that the disproportionately powerful United States got what it wanted, while the Marshallese lived with a range of consequences ranging from serious radiation-related

health problems to permanent displacement. However, they were never simply passive victims. From sail-ins to sit-ins to UN petitions to lawsuits, the Marshallese had their own impact on the superpower. The great strength of this book is its detailed account of the steps taken by each party in turn, engaging a variety of issues specific to different atoll communities and the Marshall Islands as a whole, through forty years of US administration and beyond.

Smith-Norris builds her case from a rich archive of US and UN records as well as anthropological accounts and first-person narratives from Islanders themselves. The book devotes a chapter to each of four communities and the particular difficulties they faced, beginning with Chapter One's examination of Enewetak Atoll's early nuclear tests and the displacement of its inhabitants. Chapter Two progresses to the more familiar story of Bikini Atoll with its displacement-return-displacement narrative. In both chapters, Smith-Norris compiles a chronology showing how the US was notified repeatedly, by both Islanders and such outside observers as the Marshall Islands' district anthropologist Jack Tobin, of increasing problems with supplies and living conditions, and that US authorities were very slow to respond until Islanders took matters into their own hands, organizing protests to draw international attention and threatening lawsuits. Chapter Three picks up the thread of human-radiation effects from Bikini to the US treatment of the Rongelapese as radiation research subjects. Here in particular, Smith-Norris's carefully assembled archive challenges US justifications of both the tests themselves and the human-subject research that followed. For example, she presents a map of the fallout cloud, directly over Rongelap, juxtaposed against an official Defense Nuclear Agency report stating that 12 hours before the blast, the DOD (Department of Defense) had known the winds were shifting in that direction but allowed that the "predicted speed of these winds was low enough to be of no concern" (78-79).

Chapter Four examines how the island of Eneye became a "slum" as a consequence of the US's resettlement of Kwajalein inhabitants and its continued neglect of that resettlement. The book's final chapter traces the emergence of the Republic of the Marshall Islands as a politically independent entity, detailing the process by which the Compact of Free Association was developed. Pointedly, she notes that the communities most affected by US bombs and missile testing voted overwhelmingly against the compact; those Marshallese who were living with severe health and environmental damage had little trust in the United States and little desire to give up the right to pursue compensation in US courts, a key provision of the agreement.

In her rigorous, clear-eyed presentation of specific historical detail, Smith-Norris does make sacrifices. Isolating each community in its own chapter leaves little room to discuss how the resistance and activism of one community influenced the others. Smith-Norris points out that Bikinians requested a \$3 million settlement from the US in 1973, settling on that number because four years earlier, the Enewetakese had received a similar amount in compensation (60). But there is no discussion of how Enewetakese activism otherwise inspired

or influenced Bikinian strategies, which is an oversight for readers interested in how the Marshallese worked across communities in their resistance. Another weakness is the book's lack of context for other Micronesian communities in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Smith-Norris explains that the Northern Mariana Islands broke away to form the CNMI, negotiating their own political relationship with the US, but she omits a fuller a discussion of their reasons. Such a comparison would have shed useful light on the Marshall Islands' unique situation. In addition, there is little mention of the stakes for the other communities in the Trust Territory: Kosrae, Yap, Truk, and Ponape (now the Federated States of Micronesia) and Palau (now the Republic of Palau), or about how Guam's or the CNMI's negotiations with the US may have influenced the Marshall Islands' approach.

Ultimately, *Domination and Resistance* is a necessary and timely book. The Republic of the Marshall Islands continues to struggle with the legacy of nuclear and ballistic experiments, seeking redress most recently in the United Nations' International Court of Justice. The Marshallese are now also facing the urgent consequences of climate change: the sea is rising there faster than anywhere else in the world. It is a good thing that scholarly attention to Marshallese environmental and political struggles is increasing. Smith-Norris's book joins the chorus as an invaluable resource for historians and other scholars, as well as for activists in the work ahead.