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“Better Dead than Red”:

The Treatment of Native Americans in the Southwest during the Cold War

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In the mid-20th century, the United States was in the midst of the Cold War with Russia. During this war, the United States government sought to unite its citizens in order to combat communism. The government spread a message of unification as Americans, however publicly, this only applied to white middle-class citizens and above. The poor and minorities increasingly found themselves out of what was considered “normal.” Anything outside of the norm was looked down upon as the democratic agenda was spread throughout the United States. This established the grounds for racial, political, and religious prejudices to form and come to the forefront of society. One group that was hit very hard by the new Cold War American agenda was the Native Americans. The various tribes were subject to loss of land, image, culture, and the right to a healthy existence. The United States government subjected the tribes to this through atomic testing in Nevada, stereotypical portrayal in popular government media, treatment as autonomous groups, and through the dumping of atomic wastes, also in Nevada.

Starting in 1951, the Atomic Energy Commission designated a large area of unpopulated desert land sixty-five miles northwest of Las Vegas as the Nevada Testing Site for atmospheric atomic testing.¹ However, this land was traditional Shoshone land in the Western Shoshone

¹ “*First atomic detonation at the Nevada test site*,” accessed April 12, 2016, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-atomic-detonation-at-the-nevada-test-site>.

nation. The primary test was on January 27, 1951. This was the first in the line of testing that lasted until November 23, 1992. On this testing ground there were 928 American and 19 British nuclear explosions making the Shoshone nation the “most bombed nation on earth”.² The atomic testing continued unhindered for the next forty-one years. The dangers of these tests on the native population and the land they depend upon were never expressly talked about by the government. Instead, the United States government focused on their own people, soldiers and scientists, rather than the local populace. “The Atomic Energy Commission had studied the effects on humans by stationing ground troops as close as 2,500 yards from ground zero and moving them even closer shortly after the detonation. By 1957, though, the effects of radioactivity on the soldiers and the surrounding population led the government to begin testing bombs underground, and by 1962, all atmospheric testing had ceased.”³ This shows that the government did recognize the effects their testing had on the land, but were only concerned with their own people that could protest.

During this forty-one year period, the Shoshone nation continued losing their land. The tribe lost land to the Bureau of Land Management, Park Service, Atomic Energy Commission, Department of Defense, etc. and as of 1996 the United States authorities controlled approximately 90 percent of Shoshone land.⁴ With this reduction of land the Shoshone tribe was forced to survive in their already desolate environment while contending with radiation from the tests that came in the form of fallout. The tribe reported unusual animal deaths and gardens

² Andreas Knudsen, “*Native Americans Bear the Nuclear Burden*,” accessed April 15, 2016, <http://www.republicoflakotah.com>.

³ “*First atomic detonation at the Nevada test site.*”

⁴ “*Native Americans Bear the Nuclear Burden.*”

turning black and remains at high risk of cancer and birth defects.⁵ Despite this obvious correlation from the nuclear tests, the Atomic Energy Commission still refuted it.

In 1962 and 1963 the Atomic Energy Commission began releasing informational booklets in a series called “Understanding the Atom.” Two of these booklets were *Fallout from Nuclear Tests* and *Atoms in Agriculture*. These booklets aimed to relax the public who had concerns from the testing done in Nevada. The *Fallout from Nuclear Tests* booklet does state that “there can be considerable damage to life from local fallout in areas far removed from those suffering effects of blast and fire.”⁶ Even with this admission that fallout from these tests can do considerable damage to local areas, namely Shoshone land, the tribe’s damages to life and land were not given any attention. Instead, the booklet actually goes on to say: “The consensus of informed individuals is that the present or anticipated levels of radiation exposure from fallout due to nuclear tests (through 1962) do not constitute a hazard that warrants individual anxiety.”⁷

After the damage the tribe suffered from the tests, the Shoshone nation was further pushed into a situation of dealing with the government tests. In the 1900s, with the ceasing of nuclear tests and the increase in atomic energy plants, the government sought areas to store the atomic wastes created as a by-product. The United States designated an area in the Yucca Mountains, which are shared by both the Western Shoshone nation and the Goshute tribes, as the final repository for nuclear wastes. For this Goshute tribal lands are the main focus for the pollution from the wastes.

In December of 1991 David Leroy, the director of the Office of Nuclear Waste Negotiation at the time, spoke to the National Congress of American Indians offering a new deal

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ C. L. Comar, *Fallout from Nuclear Tests* (Oak Ridge, Tennessee: USAEC Division of Technical Information Extension, 1963), 7.

⁷ Ibid, 35.

for economic development.⁸ This deal allowed tribes to directly negotiate with the Department of Energy to store high-level radioactive spent fuel rods from the commercial nuclear industry on their reservation lands.⁹ The government wanted to store these spent fuel rods in the reservation lands for their remoteness away from “civilization” completing disregarding the native population of the area. The Atomic Energy Commission had mentioned the danger in another booklet from the “Understanding the Atom” series, *Radioactive Wastes*. The booklet states that the reason the waste is so hard to store is that “These wastes produce substantial amounts of heat for a number of years. Furthermore, their long-lived radioisotopes require hundreds of years to decay to safe levels; during all this time they must be stored away from man and his environment.”¹⁰ The tribes were expected to house these highly radioactive wastes on their land as a service not only to the government but also to themselves. The argument used by Leroy to the assembled natives appealed to their belief in their relationship with nature. Leroy argued that “Native American culture and perspective and its timeless wisdom about man and culture has a unique political and cultural relationship with the land, therefore they are best suited for this endeavor.”¹¹ Despite this ridiculous argument and protests by many communities, sixteen tribes responded positively to the Department of Energy’s proposal.

The tribes received money from the department and, due to the high levels of poverty in the reservation, the protests were ignored. This abuse of the economic situation of the reservation has been commented on by Bayley Lopez from the Nuclear Age Peace foundation as “the government and private companies taking advantage of the overwhelming poverty on native

⁸ Tracylee Clarke, “Goshute Native American Tribe and Nuclear Waste: Complexities and Contradictions of a Bounded-Constitutive Relationship,” *Environmental Communication* 4 (2010): 387, doi: 10.1080/17524032.2010.520724.

⁹ Ibid, 387.

¹⁰ Charles H. Fox, *Radioactive Wastes* (Oak Ridge, Tennessee, USAEC Division of Technical Information Extension, 1969), 24-5.

¹¹ Clarke, “Goshute Native American Tribe,” 388.

reservations by offering them millions of dollars to host nuclear waste storage sites.”¹²

However, the Skull Valley Goshute tribe in Utah submitted for and received a grant to investigate the benefits and consequences before accepting the offer. The Goshutes, after the investigation, leased land to PFS, a private consortium of electrical utilities for the temporary storage of spent nuclear fuel instead of the government.¹³

This temporary and private leasing of land by the tribe has been fought against by the Bureau of Indian Affairs because it halts the government’s attempt of obtaining the lands for a repository. Despite this small victory, the Goshutes have now become divided on whether or not they should sell their land to the government. The tribe is caught between economic need and cultural preservation. Unfortunately for the tribe, the government’s treatment of their tribe for the duration of Cold War has put them in a scenario that may force them out of their ancestral home despite any protests. The tribe is near one of the biggest assortments of weapons and hazardous/toxic- waste storage or test sites in the US. One tribal member remarked: “People need to understand that this whole area has already been deemed a waste zone by the federal government, the state of Utah, and the country...Tooele Depot, a military site, stores 40% of the nation’s nerve gas and other hazardous gas only 40 miles away from us. Dugway proving grounds, an experimental life science center, is only 14 miles away, and its experiments with viruses like plague and tuberculosis. Within a 40-mile radius there are three hazardous waste dumps and a low level radioactive waste dump. From all directions, north south, east, west we’re surrounded by the waste of Tooele County, the State of Utah and US society.”¹⁴

¹² “*Reservations about Toxic Waste: Native American Tribes Encouraged to Turn Down Lucrative Hazardous Disposal Deals,*” accessed April 14, 2016, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/earth-talk-reservations-about-toxic-waste/>

¹³ Clarke, 388.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 395.

The tribe is situated between a chemical testing ground, bombing range, chemical depository, magnesium plant, uranium-processing plant, a nerve-gas storage facility, and a low level radioactive waste deposit site. Despite this comprising location, the tribe still seeks to remain on their ancestral land. This will to remain caused the Goshutes to have an incident comparable to the Shoshone's radioactive fallout.

In 1968, a test conducted at the Dugway Proving Grounds during the height of the Cold War proved devastating to the tribe. A fighter jet sprayed nerve gas that drifted into the valley and onto a nearby grazing allotment, killing 6,000 sheep within days. The military quietly gathered the carcasses and buried them in Skull Valley.¹⁵ This damage to the tribe's resources was not publicized nor repaid. This history of poor treatment by the government has caused the reality of remaining on their land to turn dark. Leon Bear, tribal chairman and leader of the supporters for the waste repository put this sad reality into words: "We can't do anything here that's green or environmental. Would you buy a tomato from us if you knew what was out here? Of course not!"¹⁶ The Goshute continued to fight the government but almost gave in and offered their land in 2007 when public pressure caused them to forego their plans. Finally, in February of 2009, the U.S. Department of Energy announced intentions to scale back efforts to make Yucca Mountain the nation's sole repository of radioactive nuclear waste and to look into alternative long-term strategies for dealing with its spent nuclear fuel.¹⁷

Another tribe still affected by the Cold War is the Navajo Nation in the Four Corners region of the Southwestern United States. In this region, 1100 uranium mines are situated that

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 397.

¹⁷ "Reservations about Toxic Waste."

were operational from the 1940s to the 1980s.¹⁸ More than 500 of these abandoned sites contain mixtures of Uranium, Arsenic, and other metals. These mines have consequently poisoned local water sources used by livestock and residents who lack access to regulated water sources on the Navajo Nation land.¹⁹ This is a case that is reoccurring throughout the Southwest in which government or private groups, seeking the quick fortune during the Cold War, dug Uranium mines. These mines were then abandoned with disregard to the dangerous minerals and waste produced from the mining. The mine waste sites that are located in Native American communities have been overlooked because of low population densities and the remoteness of the waste sites themselves.²⁰ These mines were located quite close to native communities, but it was not until 1978 that the Atomic Energy Act began regulating the Uranium left over wastes at mines.²¹ Therefore, the mines that shut down in the early 60s were not regulated and most of these were on the Native lands. An investigation into whether these mines presented a threat to the Navajo public in 2015 tested water that was within a half mile of Blue Gap/Tachee community homes.

One water sample came from a seep that had been identified by local residents whose families had used the location for drinking water and livestock water in the 1960s and 1970s.²² The study concluded that the water sources tested had 2-5 times higher concentrations of Uranium than allowed by the US Environmental Protection Agency in regulated drinking water.²³ This concludes that through the 60s and 70s the Navajo tribe members and their

¹⁸ Johanna M. Blake et al., “Elevated Concentrations of U and Co-occurring Metals in Abandoned Mine Wastes in a Northeastern Arizona Native Community,” *Environ. Sci. Technol* 49, no. 14 (2015): 8506–8514, accessed April 15, 2016, doi: 10.1021/acs.est.5b01408.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 8506.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 8507.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ *Ibid*, 8508

livestock were ingesting Uranium which is known to attack the kidneys in humans and have adverse development in animals. The United States government's lack of care for the Navajo caused damage that was never recognized. However, one tribe did manage to get public attention to their plight of Uranium mine wastes.

The Havasupai, or "people of the blue-green water", have their sole source of drinking water threatened by Uranium mine waste in the Grand Canyon area. At this time, four uranium mines operate within the watershed that drains directly into Grand Canyon National Park.²⁴ The Havasupai were joined by many people from around the country and were able to get a 20-year ban on Uranium mining in the area. These different situations are among the worst consequences of the government's enterprises in gathering resources and building up armaments in the Cold War. To get away with the total disregard for human life the United States government began to portray the Native Americans as savage beasts that are no different than the communist threat the US now faced.

Civil Defense , a branch of the government dedicated to preparing the United States for nuclear war, began releasing booklets, comics, movies, and other forms of propaganda to inform the public of their enemy and why they must prepare. In several of these documents a mural was the center point of discussion. The mural showed the challenges Americans had to face throughout the history of the United States. Two examples of these will be discussed. In *Operation Survival!*, a comic from 1957 that tells of two children who are trapped by a flood and forced to hold up in a bomb shelter, there is an image of settlers in their covered wagons fighting off mounted Indian attackers. The top of the page reads "Since time began there have always been dangers to threaten men and men have always sought ways to protect themselves." The

²⁴ Mark Udall, "Grand Canyon Water, at the Abyss," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2015.

caption beside the image of the settlers reads “Western settlers banded together to repel Indian attacks.”²⁵

Another publication, from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* has an image of a family sitting around listening to the story of America. Above them is a mural of the obstacles Americans have faced. The second image is of a settler in front of his burning house firing a gun at a horde of attacking Indians that are waving tomahawks and bows. In the article it reads: “An Indian war party, armed with tomahawks, scalping knives, and fire arrows, was just as terrible to your great-grandmother’s generation as the threat of atomic warfare is to ours.”²⁶ Both of these comments put Native Americans on the same level as the communist Russians that the United States had been indoctrinated into hating. This shows the public and the children reading the comics that Natives are just savage enemies of American progress. The American populace, seeing these messages that are approved by the government became desensitized to the Native plight. Any change sought by the Native tribes was pushed to the back as the American society fought to eradicate anything that was against the norm. This desensitization allowed the government to push the policy of termination against many tribes during the 50s.

Many tribes were terminated in the 50s and 60s but one tribe in particular is the epitome of this policy; the Klamath. Congress passed Public Law 587 on August 13, 1954, calling for “the termination of Federal supervision over the property of the Klamath Tribe of Indians located in the State of Oregon and the individual members.” The law defined tribal property as personal property. A tribal roll would be created, and “at midnight of the date of the enactment of this Act the roll of the tribe shall be closed and no child born thereafter shall be eligible for enrollment.”²⁷

²⁵ “*Operation Survival!*” (New York, N.Y.: Graphic Information Service Inc., 1957), 1.

²⁶ “What to do if A-Bombs Fall”, *The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, February 11, 1951.

²⁷ Donald Fixico, “*Termination and Restoration in Oregon*,” accessed April 14, 2016, http://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/termination_and_restoration/#.VxQQrTArLIU.

This was presented to the public as a way to give the power back to the tribe and they will no longer be under the US government. Assistant Interior Secretary Orme Lewis recommended termination and stated “It is our belief that the Klamath Tribe and the individual members thereof have.... sufficient skill and ability to manage their own affairs without special Federal assistance.”²⁸

This excuse was to hide the real reason for termination. Once the tribe was terminated, they were able to enter the free enterprise system and sell their own property. However, they lacked the sociocultural experience to think capitalistically and execute competitively.²⁹ This caused the government and public interests to take advantage of the vast lumber resources that were on reservation lands. In post-war America the rise of suburbia caused an increased need for wood as more houses were being built. This idea is proven in the Congressional records. In the hearing for termination, Senator Watters states: “...while this appraisal is being prepared, we are supposed to set up some management plans whereby the timber resources of the reservation will be managed under termination.”³⁰ The United States government abused their power in order to exploit the resources that were on different reservations. In all, 109 tribes were terminated. Approximately 2,500,000 acres of trust land was removed from protected status and 12,000 Native Americans lost tribal affiliation.³¹ Some of these tribes have been given back their federal protection however a few tribes have completely dissolved.

The Cold War was a time of turmoil and lies while trying to advance the American agenda against the Soviets. During this time, Native Americans were subject to loss of land,

²⁸ Donald L. Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century* (Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1998), 85.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁰ *Klamath Indian Tribe—Termination of Federal Supervision*, Subcommittee on Indian Affairs; Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs (1956), 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*

image, culture, and the right to a healthy existence. The atomic testing progressed the technology of the United States into a new era. However, it cost the Natives their old way of life. New destroys the old. Seen as a hindrance to advancement, the government labeled them as the attackers of American progress, as seen through the Civil Defense comics. The then subsequent dumping of nuclear waste on their land with no long-term care exposed the Native Americans to cancer-inducing chemicals and caused their land to wither away and become polluted for decades. The United States government subjected them to great injustices that are still awaiting deserved retribution.

About the author

James P Gregory Jr. recently graduated with honors from the University of Central Oklahoma with a B.A. in History: Museum Studies and a B.A. in Humanities. His research focuses on military history and Civil Defense during the Cold War