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Nuclear Savage: The Islands of Secret Project 4.1

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By RICHARD KUIPERS

The human and political legacy of nuclear tests conducted in the Marshall Islands from 1946-58 is examined in the highly charged and well assembled documentary "Nuclear Savage: The Islands of Secret Project 4.1." Combining testimony from Marshallese civilians with gold-class archival footage, Adam Jonas Horowitz's docu investigates the explosive claim that islanders were deliberately exposed to radiation as part of a secret U.S. government study. Pic reps a good fit for fests and pubcasters, and the TV-hour version is sure to trigger discussion when broadcast on PBS in 2013. On-air date has yet to be announced.

Punchy opening segments include a potted history of the island group from the time of its first significant contact with Europeans in the 1800s until 1947, when it was officially placed under U.S. administration. The first of 67 nuclear weapons tests was conducted on Bikini Atoll in July 1946.

Describing the Marshall Islands as "paradise turned upside-down," Horowitz contrasts images of the fully operational Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on Kwajalein Atoll with abandoned parts of the archipelago, where radiation levels remain too high for former residents and their families to return. Footage of living conditions on Ebeye Island, home to some 16,000 displaced persons occupying just 65 acres, strongly supports Horowitz's claim that this destination has become "the ghetto of the Pacific."

With former and present American officials declining on-camera requests for interviews, the docu turns to excerpts from the huge volume of government footage shot prior to and during the tests. References to the Marshallese as "savages," with military brass emphasizing the importance of U.S. supremacy in the nuclear field, are pointedly interwoven with contempo interviews featuring elderly women remembering the time when "our hair fell out and we got sick," and the shockingly deformed babies many gave birth to.

Though allegations of secret programs and cover-ups have been around for many years, "Nuclear Savage" brings fresh information to the table via previously classified U.S. government documents obtained by Tony DeBrum, minister of foreign affairs in the Marshallese government at the time of filming, and a child witness to many of the explosions. Specific case in question is "Castle Bravo,"

the code name for the detonation of a hydrogen bomb at Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954.

While no one disputes that the strong winds carrying fallout from the blast resulted in severe contamination of residents on nearby islands, DeBrum is concerned with discovering hard evidence that weather forecasts were ignored and large numbers of people were deliberately contaminated for the express purpose of studying long-term effects of radiation on humans. With proof resting on an intricate series of communiques and minute amendments to Project 4.1 documents in the days just prior to Castle Bravo, the docu assumes the qualities of a detective thriller with massive moral, political and financial implications.

Whether or not auds subscribe to Horowitz's proposal that the Marshall Islands are a "microcosm of what modern man has done to the entire world," few will be left unmoved by the indisputable evidence of lives being severely affected by the weapons testing program.

Information-packed docu is briskly paced and professionally packaged. Only slightly bum note is the overuse of cheery Western songs about idyllic island life, played over images of radiation victims and environmental destruction wrought by nuclear testing. Other technical aspects are fine.

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