

About this issue's cover: American Military Sublime

The photo of Vice Admiral H.P. 'Spike' Blandy and his wife gleefully slicing up an atomic explosion angel cake was taken on November 6, 1946.¹ Blandy had recently overseen the evacuation of one hundred and seventy six inhabitants from Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific to make way for U.S. atomic bomb testing (Bikini was part of an archipelago of islands that the U.S. took control of during the Second World War). Earlier that year, in February, Commodore Ben Wyatt had announced the plan at the close of the islanders' weekly church service, assuring his captive audience all their needs would be taken care of by the U.S. government.² He then likened the Bikinians to 'the Children of Israel whom the Lord saved from the enemy and led into the Promised Land'.³

After blasting the hell out of the atoll, the joint army-navy task force in charge of the first round of tests celebrated their achievement with a party at the Officers Club of the Army War College in Washington, D.C. The cake in the photograph was hand-crafted by bakers in Saint Louis and express shipped to Washington, just for the occasion.⁴

One of the Bikini task force's much touted scientific hands-on atom bomb 'experiments' was to leave 176 goats, 136 pigs and 3030 rats on ships moored near the test site to see what happened. The results (instant death or excruciatingly painful burns or radiation exposure), were predictable.⁵ Blandy took it all in stride: 'if the ships had been manned with normal crews there would have been a great many men who wouldn't even know right after the bomb explosion that they were to die later'.⁶

His medical officer added that after fifteen days, surviving animals 'have good chances for permanent recovery' thanks to 'penicillin and blood transfusions'.⁷ You can probably guess where this is going: first the goats, then the soldiers. In 1949, reports surfaced that sailors assigned to scrape paint off Bikini-irradiated ships had been hospitalized with 'enlarged hands'.⁸ The navy issued a terse statement: "No



person taking part in the atomic bomb tests in the Pacific has ever been on the sick list as the result of the atomic blast'.⁹

When U.S. scientists exploded the first atomic bomb on June 16, 1945, nuclear physicist James Robert Oppenheimer, who headed the project, was so awe-struck he thought of a passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* in which the Supreme God Vishnu reveals Himself, declaring 'Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds'. Within two years, having reduced sublime terror to cake-like proportions, the American military was cutting into it, relishing it, and swallowing it.

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NOTES

1. 'Salute to Bikini', *Washington Post* (November 8, 1946): 18 (photograph).
2. Jonathan A. Weisgall, 'The Nuclear Nomads of Bikini Island', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Sunday, June 29, 1980): section 2, 1.
3. Ibid.
4. 'Pastor Blasts Atomic Bomb Cake Replica', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Monday, November 11, 1946): part 1, 1.
5. Wayne Thomas, 'Find A-Bomb Killed 4rth of Bikini Beasts', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Tuesday, July 23, 1946): part 1, 1.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. 'Denies Navy Men Harmed in Bikini A-Bomb Blasts', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Tuesday, October 11, 1949): part 1, 3.
9. Ibid.