

Downwind of the Atomic State: Atmospheric Testing and the Rise of the Risk Society.

By James C. Rice. New York: NYU Press, 2023. ISBN 978-1-4798-1534-0. Maps. Figures. Notes. Index. Pp. ix, 365. \$38.00 (hardback).

From the early 1950s to the early 1960s, the United States government conducted more than 100 nuclear tests at the Nevada Test Site. These tests dispersed radioactive debris downwind and throughout much of the country. In *Downwind of the Atomic State*, James C. Rice, a professor of sociology at New Mexico State University, seeks to explain why the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) “was negligent in confronting the hazards of radioactive contamination—as they were understood at the time” (p. 9). In attempting to understand this negligence, Rice seeks to confront two myths. The first is that AEC officials understood the risks of radioactive fallout but simply did not care about the public health consequences. The second is that AEC officials did the best they could to mitigate and minimize the risks given the state of knowledge at the time.

How, then, does Rice explain the commission’s attempt to minimize the effects of radioactive fallout considering these two myths? He attributes the AEC’s behavior to organizational deviance, which is defined as conduct that strays from “both formal design goals and normative standards or expectations” (p. 10). This condition, in turn, “was predicated on assumptions that proved erroneous over time and contributed to failures of foresight, leading to mistakes that served as the impetus to misconduct and cover-up” (p. 10). These assumptions included: (1) fallout is subject to predictable atmospheric dispersion; (2) the public is prone to unreasoning panic; and (3) external gamma radiation exposure is the primary hazard of testing (p. 10). “These heuristics had systemic implications,” Rice concludes, “such that AEC officials were continually chasing the unanticipated material and biophysical characteristics of fallout rather than proactively initiating measures necessary to protect the health of downwind residents” (p. 10).

Rice organizes his book chronologically with eleven chapters (plus an introduction and a conclusion) divided into three parts. To understand the AEC’s hesitancy to deal with issues of fallout, Rice utilizes a wide range of sources, including AEC documents, legal proceedings, scientific studies, and other contemporary material. The result is a penetrating and sophisticated book informed by his training in sociology. The reader will find that Rice has used sociological theory as the infrastructure around which he develops his analysis. Specifically, he relies on—among other theories—the “dark side of organizations,” which “is concerned with failures of foresight and blind spots in decision-making” (p. 42).

Utilizing this theoretical tradition, he argues that: “AEC officials understood that open-air detonations generated a connection between the organizational, technological, and ecological, and yet in substantive terms, this intertwining was remarkably invisible. It was understood that radioactive debris ascended into the atmosphere, but the idea that radioactivity intertwined with grass, cows, milk, and babies was less clear. The failure of AEC officials to anticipate and plan for radio-

active contamination stemmed from organizational failures of foresight rooted in reticence to acknowledge that the nonhuman world is teeming with complexity, movement, and pushback” (pp. 42–43).

The book, however, is much more than an examination of the AEC’s failures as an organization. The final chapter explores how scientists since Francis Bacon have attempted to modify the natural world in the service of mankind. In particular, atomic scientists such as Edward Teller advocated “atomic geoengineering,” the use of nuclear explosions for making a harbor or open-pit mining among other uses. From the early 1960s, the AEC conducted twenty-seven nuclear detonations for these purposes. In 1958, the AEC laid plans for using six thermonuclear detonations to make a harbor on the northwestern Alaskan coast. Local villagers, along with scientists from the University of Alaska, successfully fought against the project. This victory formed a crack in the AEC’s carefully choreographed narrative that minimized the dangers of fallout from atomic testing. By 1962, Rice argues, alternative narratives emerged that challenged the AEC’s prevailing one. These new explanations not only challenged the supposed safety of atmospheric testing but also explored the “ethic of concern for the nonhuman world” (p. 286).

This brief review cannot explore the many nuanced arguments Rice makes. Nearly every page has provocative insights worthy of contemplation. Because of the complexity of his methodology and argument, this is not a book for general readers. Familiarity with sociological methodology and theory will aid the individual to fully digest Rice’s work. In short, it is a book for those who want to spend the time to read a sophisticated and interdisciplinary take on the history of how the AEC created and maintained its efforts to frame nuclear atmospheric testing as safe to humans and nature. Rice’s book is often a grim story, but his is a cautionary analysis that sheds necessary light on the general issue of large bureaucracies and the skewed narratives they sometimes create to explain their activities to the public.

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Arming East Asia: Deterring China in the Early Cold War. By Eric Setzekorn. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2023. ISBN 978-1-6824-7851-6. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xii, 306. \$31.95 (hardback).

This cogently written, well-researched, and quite timely monograph fills a gap in Cold War military history by both recounting the experiences of the members of the Military Assistance Advisory Groups (MAAGs) sent to Asia during the Eisenhower administration, as well as analyzing the reasons for their varying levels of success. Focusing on the officer training programs undertaken in South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, South Vietnam, and Thailand, United States Army Center

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