

Book Review

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

By James C. Rice

(New York: New York University Press, 2023. vii+ 376 pp.
Illustrations, notes, index. \$38, hardcover.)

From the beginning of atomic testing with the Trinity Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico, in 1945 until Project Plowshare in 1962 in the Great Basin of Nevada, the military and federal government took the policy of strict secrecy, arguing that if downwind residents were informed before detonations, then it would cause unnecessary panic. However, this made it nearly impossible for downwind residents to protect themselves using decontamination procedures. In *Downwind of the Atomic State: Atmospheric Testing and the Rise of the Risk Society*, James C. Rice argues that the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) was multifaceted and provides a case study in organizational deviance. Rice explains that “organizational deviance 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). The AEC assumed that the path of fallout was predictable, that the public was prone to panic, and that external gamma radiation was the primary hazard of atomic testing. In the end, the AEC made the public fearful of atomic testing because of their lack of communication.

Rice explains that the AEC tried to control and predict nature in the process of atomic testing, but they did not account for the push and pull of human provocation and nature nor the reaction of downwind residents to atmospheric testing. The AEC tried to manage the nonhuman world, however, “nature exhibits independent force, fluidity, efficacy, and change. Nature has agency” (p. 120). In the 1950s, as it became clear that the public and press would not ignore nuclear testing, the AEC reformulated their public relations approach to treat detonations as spectacles. But they continued to display willful ignorance about the health threats of atomic fallout.

At its core, *Downwind of the Atomic State* is a story of the AEC’s mismanagement of communicating with the public about the dangers of nuclear testing. The book tells the history of the AEC prioritizing national security over the cost of public health and explains that the commission’s

failure was not the risks they undertook, but how the AEC communicated these risks to the public. Rice writes that “atmospheric atomic detonations enrolled the entire world in a biological experiment without informed consent or voluntary participation” (p. 258). The AEC and military officials used adults, children, infants, and livestock as specimens for scientific analysis as they learned about the risk of atomic testing but neglected to relay these threats to the public. Clearly written and thoroughly analyzed, Rice offers fresh insights into the history of the AEC, theories regarding power and knowledge, and the failure of the military and AEC to adequately inform the public about the hazards atomic testing posed.

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