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BRAVO Test: No 'Guinea Pigs'

Cynthia Gorney's piece ["Islands in a Storm," Style, April 7] on Dennis O'Rourke's award-winning film about the Marshall Islands demands immediate comment—not because of any error on Gorney's part, but to agree emphatically with O'Rourke's definitions of what he is (a filmmaker) and what the film is (observational). Would that he had been more observant and more willing to give fair consideration to facts and observations.

My credentials? I was at Bikini as a Los Alamos physics experimenter during the BRAVO test in 1954. From 1972 until my retirement from the Department of Energy last September, I worked continuously on Marshall Islands' problems, including in particular that department's responsibility for the follow-up care of the Rongelap people and other related remedial actions. I have testified under oath before congressional committees considering these matters and served as a member/technical adviser of the U.S. delegation that negotiated the agreement with the Republic of the Marshall Islands relative to the consequences of the BRAVO test.

More important, however, is the fact that I was in repeated contact with O'Rourke during the time he made the film "Half Life," at first on his initiative, offering him access to authoritative documentation and offering also to meet with him and to cooperate with him in making the premise of his argument factual. Regrettably, the offer of such a meeting was not accepted.

I in no way intend to suggest that the accident that befell the people of Rongelap on March 1, 1954, was anything less than tragic. But it does not soothe their hurt to so distort the record as to have the victims, and the world, believe their injuries were deliberately and malevolently inflicted by the United States. Such a notion is doubly abhorrent to me, as it suggests not only that our government would carry out such a plan, but that those individuals responsible for executing the BRAVO test (many of whom were then and later my respected associates and friends) would be parties to it.

The film "Half Life" uses a number of clips to describe the weather conditions in the Marshall Islands at BRAVO time, making the point that those in authority were aware of the "unfavorable" conditions. What the film fails to say is that the descriptions presented are irrelevant. It was not the surface winds, or those in the 20,000-foot regime, that carried the fallout great distances to the east; it was the stratospheric winds, which on that day, for the first time in the history of atomic bomb testing, came to be recognized as a vital consideration.

The root cause of the BRAVO accident was that the test device achieved a yield, or explosive force, three times that which had been expected, and that that force carried a cloud of debris, much larger than had been expected, to very high altitudes, where it was diffused over a much larger area than had theretofore been thought possible.

During the late-hour preparations, including the meteorological briefing 45 minutes before the test, the task force commander and his scientific staff had been assured, on the basis of information then available, that conditions were such that no fallout should reach the populated atolls to the east. Rongelap and Rongerik were specifically considered and named.

Of course, we now know that the fallout did reach Rongelap and Rongerik (and Utirik as well). A fair examination of the record will reveal that once that fact was known, those in authority acted responsibly and with dispatch to alleviate the immediate suffering and mitigate the long-term effects. To use the term "guinea pig" in this context is a grave injustice to many dedicated scientists, practitioners, technicians and administrators with a long-term commitment to the well-being of the injured population.

I must make one further point, which has to do with the sad plight of Leko Anjan, the young man exposed to BRAVO effects as an infant who died of leukemia here at the National Institutes of Health 18 years later. I know his family. I attended his memorial service in 1972. His mother's bitterness is understandable. But Leko was not "used" any more than any of us is used by his/her physician, endeavoring to learn, through each patient's course of treatment, how better to deal with the next similar experience. A responsible and compassionate nation, considering no other recourse, provided to this unfortunate young man the best it knew how to offer.

The film industry may judge itself on whatever standards it adopts. If it chooses to reward directorship in observational filmmaking, that surely is its privilege. But let no one suggest that the product "Half Life" is even substantially consistent with the historical record or with fact; and let not a journal such as The Post pretend that it is journalism.

—Roger Ray

