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Boom and Bust: The nuclear age and the bikini age

From a tiny island in the Pacific Ocean to the beaches of the world: the summer of 1946 unleashed the power of mass destruction - and mass distraction.

By Rupert Cornwell in Washington and John Lichfield in Paris

The nuclear age

At precisely 9am on 1 July 1946, a huge orange yellow fireball exploded in the sky above Bikini Atoll, 500ft above a fleet of ships waiting like tethered goats before a tiger. Conducted by the United States and codenamed Abel, it was the fourth atomic explosion in history. And with it, a tiny slice of paradise in the remote Pacific Ocean became a metaphor for the nuclear era.

These days, if you have a taste for exotic holidays and funds to match, you may travel to this same north-western corner of the Marshall Islands, now part of the Federated States of Micronesia. There you may don a swimsuit - one or two pieces, it does not matter - and enjoy some phenomenal scuba diving among the ghostly sunken warships.

Or you may indulge a passion for game fishing. Or, if you are of an indolent disposition, you may sunbathe in a setting described thus by Condé Nast Traveller magazine not so long ago: "There are not many places on earth that could look more like the Garden of Eden". Sixty years ago however, Armageddon was a better comparison.

How the name of Bikini Atoll became co-terminous with a revolution in beachwear is a quirk of history - but an apposite quirk nonetheless. If the swimwear bikini gave a new post-war meaning to sexiness, power is its own kind of aphrodisiac. And in the years between 1946 and 1958, when the US carried out 23 nuclear tests on the atoll, Bikini witnessed the greatest displays of destructive military might on the planet.

They began with Operation Crossroads, a new series of nuclear tests to develop the weapon used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki 11 months earlier. The first was Abel - the fourth explosion thus far, after the original test at Alamogordo, New Mexico, in July 1945, and the two bombs dropped in anger on Japan that August. With planned yields of around 20,000 kilotons, Abel and Baker were twice as large as their predecessors. A dozen decommissioned American and Japanese warships were moored nearby to measure their effect.



In early 1946, the governor of the Marshall Islands had asked the 167 inhabitants of Bikini to leave their home "temporarily", so that the US could try out atomic bombs "for the good of mankind and to end all world wars". Given that the Cold War nuclear balance kept the peace for 50 years, that promise may be said to have been kept. Not so however the promises to the Bikinians. For two years they were shunted around the Marshalls, scattered over 357,000 square miles of ocean. Once they almost starved. Their way of life was effectively destroyed, and it took an international outcry in 1947 for the US to treat them decently.

Back in the US, Abel was causing much trepidation. A few years later tourists would flock to Las Vegas to watch nuclear tests in the Nevada desert from their hotel roof as they sipped their cocktails. Back in late June 1946 however, some feared that Operation Crossroads would unleash earthquakes and tsunamis. Others predicted radioactive waves would sweep the US.

In the event, the first blast at Bikini, observed by armies of American scientists, military specialists, analysts as well as reporters from around the world, did relatively little damage. Baker, the second explosion on 25 July, was a very different matter. Detonated underwater, it sent every nearby vessel to the bottom.

But the worst of the horrors visited on Bikini Atoll came in 1954, when the US began a new series of tests of the new-fangled hydrogen bomb tests at the atoll. The "Bravo" test, on 1 March that year, was reckoned to measure 13 megatons, more than 1,000 times as powerful as Hiroshima. That morning, inhabitants of the atoll remembered, "two suns rose in sky". What fell back to earth was gritty ash, white like snow, that irradiated everyone and everything it touched.

By then the native Bikinians had been moved on yet again, to Kili island in the southern Marshalls, where they nearly starved and which became known as "prison island". In the late 1960s, a clean-up programme began. The original inhabitants were awarded \$325,000 in compensation, and in 1974, the first families were allowed to return to Bikini Atoll. Four years later they were again evacuated after fresh tests showed an "incredible" increase in levels of radioactive strontium-90 and cesium-137.

In a small act of compensation, the US agreed in 1985 to make over the sunken warships to the people of Bikini, and these provide some of the most spectacular underwater tourism anywhere. The largest are the Second World War aircraft carrier USS Saratoga, and the Nagato, the infamous flagship of Admiral Yamamoto who masterminded the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour.

The extraordinary blend of eco-tourism and war-tourism has given Bikini a new life. You can breathe there, walk there, and swim there - in fact you can do everything except eat the local food, which remains contaminated. Meanwhile, the financial wrangling continues. The Bikinians sought further compensation and in 2001 the US Nuclear Claims Tribunal awarded them \$563m. The money has not been forthcoming, and two months ago they filed a new claim for \$724m. In the meantime, a defiled Garden of Eden on the other side of the world is there to be marvelled at, in a bikini if you will. As for the obscenities of half a century ago, they are not even a shadow in the sky.

The bikini age

Sixty years ago, a Frenchman sitting on a beach in the south of France decided that less was more. All along the beach, young women were rolling up, or down, their clunky, two-piece swimsuits to expose themselves to the sun and to other people's sons. It occurred to Louis Réard that money could be made from navel-gazing.



A few days later, on 5 July 1946, at an open-air swimming pool in Paris, he displayed the first truly skimpy swimming costume. Réard called it the "bikini", hoping that his invention would be as explosive as the US nuclear test on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands four days earlier. It was lucky for Réard that the Americans chose that tiny atoll, rather than one of its many neighbours. Bikini is a perfect name for a minuscule two-piece swimsuit. It might have been harder to persuade women to wear the Ailinglaplap or the Enewetak.

In truth, the bikini was originally a flop. It took 10 years for the tiny garment to become successful, even in France. Réard, a car engineer, who also worked for his mother's lingerie company, never managed to make much money from it. He spent many years before his death in 1984 pursuing manufacturers who had pirated his invention.

The bikini found its place in - and became synonymous with - the explosion of sexual liberation in the 1960s. Whether it was an instrument for liberating women - from something other than clothes - is disputed to this day. The bikini can be blamed for the homogenisation of the female body; for the modern obsession with a slender female form; for anorexia among teenage girls.

Its triumph runs, however, almost exactly parallel to the rise of women's freedoms and rights. A few months before Réard launched the bikini, French women won the right to vote for the first time. A couple of years later, Simone de Beauvoir published the seminal feminist work, *The Second Sex*.

Peggy Moffitt, one of the first American models to dare to pose in a bikini, believes in retrospect that the garment should be seen as an icon of liberation, not repression. "It was prophetic," Moffitt says. "It was about a changing culture throughout all society, about freedom and emancipation. It was also a reaction against something particularly American: the little boy snickering that women had breasts." There is nothing uniquely American about that.

The pro and anti arguments can go around forever, but the bikini is more than just an icon of male prurience. Most women remember their first bikini, as they remember their first date - even if they were three years old when they first wore one.

Modest, two-piece swimsuits existed before the bikini. They became common in the US during the Second World War, when Washington ordered savings on the amounts of scarce material used in swimming costumes. Skimpier two-piece dance outfits were seen in revues on Broadway from the 1920s. You can glimpse one in the pre-war Marx Brothers movie *A Night at the Opera*.

There are even bikinis - or something very like them - on Grecian urns and Roman frescoes from 1400BC onwards. The idea is, after all, rather an obvious one. It seems to have been the standard athletic costume for young Greek women in ancient times.

It was Réard who liberated the female navel for the first time. His first bikini looks remarkably modern. The top is skimpy. The bottom is cut away sharply up to the hips, almost like a loincloth. Both parts were printed with a collage of newspaper headlines.

Réard found he was unable to persuade any reputable model to wear it in public. He hired a nude dancer called Micheline Bernardini, who became the first woman ever to wear a bikini, in a showing for the press at the fashionable Piscine Molitor in the 16th arrondissement of Paris (since closed).

The garment was banned in Belgium, Italy and Spain, and - implausibly - Australia. Bikinis were declared sinful by the Vatican as late as 1964. By then, they had been popularised on



screen by Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and, above all, Brigitte Bardot, in the 1956 movie *And God Created Woman*. Everyone tends to forget that Brigitte Bardot also appeared nude in this movie. There could be no better demonstration of the power of the bikini - to draw attention to what it covers up.

Sales of bikinis in Britain and the US boomed only after 1960, with the success of Brian Hyland's song "Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weeny Yellow Polka Dot Bikini". The whole point of the lyrics - written as late as 1960 - was that the bikini was still something exciting, weird and devastatingly sexy. It also gave the bikini a kind of apple-pie innocence, describing a young woman "afraid to come out of the locker" in a bikini that she "had worn for the first time that day".

In 1962, Ursula Andress brought a more feminist aura to the bikini by emerging from the sea in a weapon-draped white bikini in the James Bond movie *Dr No*. A Channel 4 survey named that scene the sexiest scene in the history of cinema. Ms Andress recently sold her 1962 bikini for £44,000.

The advent of the thong, topless bathing - and going in the other direction - long shorts and cycling pants means that bikinis no longer have a monopoly on summer fashion. The bikini was once lost to mankind for more than 1,000 years. Could that happen again? Not very likely.