



THE PACIFIC CIRCLE

ONLINE LECTURE
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Nuclear Weapons and the Unsettling of Sovereignty in the Marshall Islands, 1944-1963

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Abstract: Between 1946 and 1958, the Marshall Islands became a critical center of the United States' nuclear weapons program. The United States detonated its largest and most powerful nuclear bombs in Indigenous lands and waters, offshoring the mass-scale violence and risk of its signal weapons system. The Marshall Islands, however, were not a part of US territory. Working through the United Nations, US diplomats engineered a sui generis international status—strategic trusteeship—into which it placed Pacific islands seized from Japan during World War II. The Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands became a novel, anomalous legal zone of US empire uniquely tied to both nuclear weapons and international law and institutions. This paper explores how this new, yet indeterminate status redefined relationships between sovereignty, territory, and jurisdiction before the worldwide cessation of US atmospheric nuclear blasting in 1963. Drawing on archival research in activists' records, court files, United Nations records, Trust Territory records, and US government agency collections, the paper traces Islanders' legal actions across three different forums. It examines how Islanders' claims over damage to their bodies, ancestral atolls, and ways of life exposed the emerging contours of strategic trusteeship and the boundaries of their belonging in national and international legal and political systems.



Admiral Wright poses for photo on Enewetak Atoll, 1946, US National Archives & Records Administration II, College Park, Maryland.

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The lecture will be held via Zoom. Please [click here](#) to register in advance, or visit <http://thepacificcircle.com/blog/> for further details.

