DANCING INTO THE MUSHROOM CLOUD: THE IDEALIZATION OF THE ATOMIC BOMB IN 1950s LAS VEGAS

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ABSTRACT

As Las Vegas, Nevada, evolved into a site of tourism and entertainment, the United States established an atomic bomb test site just 65 miles northwest of Nevada’s most populous city. The Atomic Energy Commission began atmospheric bomb tests at the Nevada Test Site in 1951, and would go on to conduct these tests for nearly 12 years. As the mushroom cloud burst into the early morning skies, workers at the test site, residents and tourists in Las Vegas, and inhabitants of Los Angeles witnessed an atomic spectacle that few Americans had the opportunity to experience. Even though these people were closer to the bomb than anyone else in the country, concerns about the weapon’s destructive power did not overwhelmingly characterize their experiences; instead, they revolved around feelings of patriotism, prosperity, and privilege.

This thesis seeks to unpack this tension that emerged during the 12-year time period when the United States tested atomic bombs at the Nevada Test Site. Critical analysis of oral histories from employees at the test site, cultural artifacts reflecting bomb imagery, and newspaper coverage of the tests reveals a multifaceted spectrum of reactions to the bomb’s presence. This thesis argues that even though being in close proximity to atomic bomb tests did lead to an array of diverse responses, the greater Las Vegas region in the 1950s saw an embrace of and intimacy with the atomic bomb as a symbol of prosperity rather than an image associated with fear or danger. The bomb tests heightened interest in the city of Las Vegas which led to a substantial economic boom. It pervaded Las Vegas tourist culture and enhanced the patriotic sentiment associated with atomic weapons development. Finally, the Americans who witnessed
an atomic bomb test felt privileged and incredibly grateful for their experience. As a whole, the bomb captivated popular imagination in the greater Las Vegas region and transformed this space during the 1950s.
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The historians at the University of Nevada Las Vegas who created the Nevada Test Site Oral History Project. Their curiosity and devotion to telling stories allowed me to enter a field of research I never thought I would find so illuminating. Without them, this project would not exist.

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INTRODUCTION
The Creation of the Nevada Test Site

“Take a town of 24,000 souls, shake it up with a few atomic explosions and what do you get –
hysteria, resentment, fear? Not in Las Vegas. The people loved it.”¹ – Garber Davidson, Los
Angeles Times

Five years after the conclusion of World War II, the chairman of the Atomic Energy
Commission (AEC), a man named Gordon Dean, approached President Harry Truman with a
proposition. The Pacific testing grounds, where the United States tested bombs from 1946 to
1962, were becoming increasingly difficult to access on a regular basis because of the escalating
tensions from the Korean War.² As the Chinese started to mobilize troops into the Korean
peninsula, Dean encouraged Truman to consider a continental nuclear test site “more secure and
accessible than Enewetak,” where the testing in the Pacific was taking place.³ By November 22,
1950, Los Alamos officials came to Truman recommending a test site in Nevada in “glowing
terms,” emphasizing that it would be easily accessible and distant enough from highly settled
areas to ensure that radioactive fallout did not harm local populations.⁴

¹ Garber Davidson, “Las Vegans Enjoy Those Atom Jolts: Tests Put Gambling City on Publicity Map and
People with Few Exceptions Want More,” Los Angeles Times, February 11, 1951, ProQuest Historical Newspapers;
This article appeared approximately two weeks after the first atomic tests were conducted at the Nevada Test Site.

² “Pacific Proving Grounds,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified March 31, 2017,

DOE/MA-0518, December 2000, accessed February 25, 2017,

⁴ Fehner and Gosling, Origins of the Nevada Test Site,” 46; Scholarship into the history of the nuclear west
determines that even though officials said there was no threat to local populations, groups living east of the site in
small towns — specifically, those in Southern Utah — experienced significant health issues because of radioactive
fallout. For further information about the harmful effects of the fallout that blew downwind from the test site, see
Sara Alisabeth Fox, Downwind: A People’s History of the Nuclear West (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska
Press, 2014).
The AEC chose the Nevada desert as the location for atomic bomb tests because it was seen as an isolated, wide open space that could be easily transformed into a test site and kept secret from unwanted visitors. As the Department of Energy’s Terrence R. Fehner and F. G. Gosling write in their “Origins of the Nevada Test Site,” “the precise characteristics that had made the region so unattractive — the desolation, lack of water, and general uninhabitableness — brought it to the attention of the federal government.”

Scholars who have explored the history of atomic testing also identified this reason. In *The Atomic West*, Bruce Hevly and John M. Findlay write: “They [the government] generally regarded the region as relatively empty, and they valued that undeveloped space for its apparent ability to buffer people from the dangers associated with making and testing nuclear weapons.”

In *Bombs in the Backyard: Atomic Testing and American Politics*, A. Costandina Titus writes: “Maintaining security in an unpopulated area surrounded by desert would be relatively simple; should an accident occur, it would affect only a few people; and monitoring the radiation exposure of a small population meant less time, less trouble, and less expensive for the AEC.”

Truman grappled with whether or not to accept Dean’s proposal for almost a month. In spite of the AEC’s assurance that the test site would be safe, the scientific community had alerted Truman to the serious risks involved. Scientists like the highly esteemed Enrico Fermi warned of the hazards of radiation, and other government scientists “knew that repeated exposure to even low-level X rays, which resembled the anticipated atmospheric radiation, caused cancer and

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other fatal illnesses.”8 Even with these warnings, Truman ultimately placed his trust in Dean and the AEC.9 On December 18, 1950, Truman approved the creation of the test site in the Nevada desert near the Nellis Air Force Base, which had been used for military pilot training in World War II.10 The AEC reassured Truman that as long as meteorologists monitored wind patterns to ensure that radioactive fallout did not pass over highly populated areas, testing bombs in this location would not harm the surrounding communities.11 On January 27, 1951, the tests in the arid and isolated Nevada desert began. Outside of a brief testing moratorium in the late 1950s, there would be over 100 atmospheric tests conducted at the Nevada Test Site (NTS), most of them happening between 1951 and 1958.12

At the beginning of the 1950s, approximately 75% of Nevada’s 160,000 person population lived in Washoe and Clark counties, where Reno and Las Vegas were located.13 Outside of those two regions, no county in the state contained more than 4% of the total population.14 The rest of the Nevada desert offered harsh conditions that were unconducive to a modern way of life. As Mary Ellen Glass writes, “the only major natural resources are those

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11 Fehner and Gosling, “Origins of the Nevada Test Site.”

12 Titus, Bombs in the Backyard: Atomic Testing and American Politics, 65; In this thesis, I will refer to the Nevada Test Site with these terms that will be used interchangeably: “NTS,” “test site,” and “site.”


14 Ibid, 39.
representative of an arid region – minerals, fresh air, and open space. . . . these physical features affected both residents and the economy.”

The areas near the test site were populated by few, with the people closest to the site living in Indian Springs, Cactus Springs or in settlements at Mt. Charleston. Indian Springs contained the Indian Springs Air Force Base, a set of facilities used to support the work at the test site. Indian Springs and Cactus Springs were located approximately an hour southeast of the site, with Mt. Charleston approximately two hours away.

Despite the NTS’s remote nature, a booming metropolis existed just 65 miles southeast of the site. In the 1950s, Las Vegas was in the process of evolving into a vibrant center of tourism revolving around excitement and exhilaration. As Victoria Randlett states in her dissertation, “The so-called Golden Era or Golden Age of Las Vegas is defined by the amazing development of the Strip in the 1950s. The years 1946 and 1958 bracket this Golden Age.”

In 1951, there were five main hotels on the strip: the El Rancho, the Flamingo, the Thunderbird, the Last Frontier, and the Desert Inn. By 1953, there were 1,800 rooms in the hotels on the strip, and new construction would continue through the end of the decade. On the Las Vegas Visitors Authority website, the “History of Las Vegas” section states that the first atomic test was conducted at the test site in 1951, and notes that the rest of the decade involved the opening of hotels like the Sahara Hotel and Casino, Sands Hotel and Casino, and the Riviera Hotel.

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15 Glass, Nevada’s Turbulent ’50s: Decade of Political and Economic Change, 5.
17 Ibid, 56
19 Ibid, 184.
20 Ibid, 192.
Significantly, Randlett’s bracketing of 1946 and 1958 as the “Golden Age” overlaps almost exactly with the years during which there was atmospheric testing. As the AEC tested atomic bombs, the Las Vegas strip was constructed. By the end of the 1950s, the entire state of Nevada had experienced a “fertile decade [that] had sprouted new institutions that would endure into the next century.”

The introduction of the test site to a growing area dependent on the influx of visitors and the commitment of its residents complicated this space, creating shifts in the Las Vegas experience during this decade. The city’s proximity to the site meant that people in Las Vegas and the surrounding areas could see the mushroom cloud when a bomb was tested. Tourists would finish their nights on the Vegas strip by rushing out into the street or climbing onto a rooftop to see a mushroom cloud light up the sky. Sally Denton and Robert Morris write that employees at the restaurants and bars in the city “were at pains to remind patrons when the hours for the shot approached so that they could ‘grab their drinks and dash out.’” The atomic bomb tests not only fascinated adults eager to spend late nights in casinos and hotels. The prospect of seeing atomic tests also drew entire families to Las Vegas. Parents and their children piled into minivans in the early hours of the morning to drive to places like Angel’s Peak to catch a glimpse of a mushroom cloud. Meanwhile, the image of the mushroom cloud became a core part of the city’s tourist culture. The bomb tests supplemented the already existent tourist

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22 Glass, *Nevada’s Turbulent ’50s: Decade of Political and Economic Change*, 5.


attractions, but also enhanced the tourist experience as a whole by providing visitors with the opportunity to see a blast – an experience afforded to few Americans.

As the tourist industry boomed in Las Vegas, the construction of the test site led to the rapid growth of new jobs in the area. The arrival of thousands of employees to the test site added significant numbers to the region, with many workers moving to Las Vegas, Indian Springs and other small towns. Many employees accepted the longer commute from their homes in Las Vegas, but the vast number of workers needed at the test site regularly also demanded the development of a small town called Mercury, where workers would commute to the site on a hour-long bus ride. Outside of a steakhouse, cafeteria, beer hall, post office and scattered dormitories, Mercury was barely a town, let alone a livable one. Living in Mercury involved mediocre housing and an existence within an extremely isolated place. However, that isolation led to a strong sense of community built upon the common effort to advance the United States’ presence in the world as the most dominant nuclear power.

The atomic bomb’s influence, though most prominent at the test site and in Las Vegas, stretched 300 miles to the west into the city of Los Angeles. Los Angeles played an integral role in this space, for two main reasons. First, Los Angeles residents composed a significant portion of the Las Vegas tourist base; and second, because people could sometimes see the mushroom

26 The testimonies from the Nevada Test Site Oral History Project include interviews in which the interviewees often described their living situations. Many of them explained that they lived in Las Vegas, while others lived in Indian Springs or in smaller settlements like Mercury. See: Lewis Miller, interview by Suzanne Becker, September 14, 2005, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 14; Helen Draper, interview by Joan Leavitt, June 24, 2004, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 5; Jerry Claborn, interview by Mary Palevsky, July 30, 2004, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 50.


28 Ibid.
cloud in Los Angeles, despite the distance. Therefore, an analysis of the presence of the atomic bomb in this region would be incomplete without discussing Los Angeles’ interpretation of the bomb tests. The language used in *Los Angeles Times* articles to describe the tests reveal a negotiation between beauty and fear, danger and excitement, risk and exhilaration. The articles presented the bomb not only as a powerful image representative of technological advancement, but also as a beautiful spectacle deserving of admiration.

The influence of the atomic bomb on the community of workers at the test site, Las Vegas tourist culture, and the coverage of the tests in Los Angeles represents the effect of the NTS on the greater Las Vegas region. Across these different spaces, the bomb had significant cultural, political and economic ramifications. The few people that actually saw a test displayed a wide spectrum of reactions. They recognized the bomb’s ability as a powerful weapon of mass destruction, and some grew concerned about being close to the tests. However, there was also a simultaneous embrace of the bomb. This acceptance emerged among a diverse set of primary source material, ranging from oral histories to newspaper articles.

This thesis explores three main ways in which people in the greater Las Vegas area welcomed the test site and embraced the atomic bomb. The patriotic sentiment stemming from the United States’ commitment to maintaining its position as the most dominant nuclear power in the world; the economic growth resulting from the creation of the site; and the fascination with the spectacle of the mushroom cloud all transformed the bomb from a weapon of mass destruction into a positive symbol representative of prosperity. In this thesis I argue that even though the atmospheric atomic bomb tests at the Nevada Test Site in the 1950s provoked a spectrum of diverse reactions from people in the greater Las Vegas region, their simultaneous
embrace and interpretation of the bomb as a symbol of patriotism, prosperity and technological advancement overpowered most fear or concern originating from their proximity to the tests.

**Literature Review**

Scholars have discussed the atomic bomb tests’ political, economic, social and cultural influence at length within the context of the Cold War and the city of Las Vegas. A. Costandina Titus’ *Bombs in the Backyard: Atomic Testing and American Politics* is one of several pieces of scholarship that explore primarily the political and social significance of the tests. *Bombs in the Backyard* emphasizes the politics of the bomb by pointing to the links between nuclear weapons and policy decisions. She argues that it is integral to our understanding of the bomb tests to study the key actors within this framework: The AEC, the federal government, and the victims of radioactive fallout, to name a few. Titus’ work has provided a valuable foundation for my own and much of my thesis engages with her scholarship.

Sara Alisabeth Fox’s *Downwind: A People’s History of the Nuclear West* also focuses primarily on the political and social significance of the tests. *Downwind: A People’s History of the Nuclear West* reveals how the bomb tests changed people’s individual lives during the 1950s. Fox conducts a social history by uncovering the struggle and pain of “downwinders” — people exposed to radioactive fallout — through analysis of interviews. She also spends time discussing the impact of the bomb tests on Native American land; an important, yet barely addressed issue within this discourse. Titus effectively illustrates the political climate during this time period, while Fox uses the power of individual narrative to guide her argument about the devastating effects of nuclear testing on the West and its inhabitants.

Titus touches briefly on the cultural impacts of the bomb, but the very political nature of her book does not leave much space for deep analysis of the bomb tests’ influence on the city of
Las Vegas. Further, she examines the events surrounding the NTS on a macro-level scale, while I plan to evaluate the micro-level through close reading and analysis of interviews. Fox’s method of using interviews and first-person narratives has inspired my own methodology. However, her absolute devotion to telling the stories of “downwinders” results in a failure to apply a narrative approach to all groups impacted by the bomb tests. The Las Vegas tourist population, which scholars have touted as one of the most significant groups in constructing the city’s identity, are excluded from her conversation. It is near impossible to include every single story and life experience in a limited study, and I am not suggesting I can achieve that end. However, my work will expand upon Fox’s by integrating additional narratives in a unique way. The existence of the Nevada Test Site Oral History Project will allow me to enter this space where I can integrate narrative story-telling with analysis of first-person accounts.

Sally Denton and Roger Morris’ *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America, 1947-2000*, discusses the tests within the context of the city as a site of crime, sex, entertainment and corruption. In their comprehensive study of 20th century Las Vegas, the pair touches on how explosions became the “lure and lore” of the city. Eugene P. Moehring’s *Resort City in the Sunbelt* is another highly respected Las Vegas historical account. Like Denton and Morris, Moehring integrates the atomic tests into his overarching discussion of the city. The key drawbacks of conducting studies devoted to 50-plus year histories of a city are that certain stories and primary accounts are left out. My comparison of oral histories from

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people working at the NTS with the tourist experience in Las Vegas will fill this gap in a novel way that will expand scholarly understanding of the region.\(^{30}\)

Mary Ellen Glass widens her study to examine the entire state of Nevada in her book *Nevada’s Turbulent 50s: Decade of Political and Economic Change*. Glass offers a narrower examination of this space by focusing primarily on the 1950s, but her efforts to unveil the cultural, political and economic dynamics from the entire region lessens the amount of scholarly work done on Las Vegas itself. However, she devotes a significant portion of her book to the economic growth in Vegas in the 1950s, which is crucial to the second chapter of this thesis.

Titus and Fox’s work focuses on the salient nature of the bomb tests, while Denton and Morris, Moehring and Glass either devote their study to the city of Las Vegas itself or write about it within the larger context of the state. Victoria Randlett’s dissertation, “Atomic Oasis: Las Vegas in its Golden Age, 1946-1958,” discusses the city and the tests in conjunction with one another, smoothing the lines between two seemingly separate phenomena. Randlett argues that the 1950s was a decade of particular importance within Las Vegas history. She states specifically that, “Any reconstruction of the process that made this strange place, then, must be a recounting of stories and atoms, bombs and mobsters.”\(^{31}\) The sixth chapter of Randlett’s dissertation, titled “Promoting the Atomic Oasis: The Chamber and the Strip” is of special significance. She argues that the city embraced the bomb and reframed it as simply another tourist attraction, which ultimately helped to heal Las Vegas’s reputation as the haven of crime


and gambling. I will expand on Randlett’s work by basing my research off of oral histories from people involved with the NTS, which were not available to her in 1999. My exploration of oral histories as an entry point into how the atomic tests shaped the collective consciousness of people in the greater Las Vegas region will add another layer onto the work that Randlett already did in this field.

Though many scholars have examined the atomic bomb tests as politically and culturally salient events, none have done so using the particular set of primary sources that I plan on investigating. The creation of the UNLV Nevada Test Site Oral History Project has opened up opportunities for scholars like myself to approach the atomic bomb tests near Las Vegas in new ways. Through the analysis of primary sources ranging from oral histories to newspaper journalism to cultural artifacts, I hope to contribute to the already important conversations being had that recognize the unique and pivotal position of Las Vegas during this time period. The integration of several primary sources in each strand of my argument has made it into a fitting contribution to American Studies scholarship.

Methodological Reflection

There were four core components of my methodology that brought me to my final thesis. The first three touch on the specific sources that I investigated: oral history transcripts from the NTS Oral History Project; images and objects that reveal the impact of the atomic bomb tests on the city of Las Vegas; and Los Angeles Times articles that discussed the bomb tests. I used a different methodological approach to analyze each branch of research, which I will detail below. The fourth major part of my methodology involved integrating my findings together, a process that helped me answer my initial research question.
The first part of my research involved close readings and analyses of NTS Oral History Project interview transcripts. Researchers at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas conducted over 100 interviews in the mid-2000s with individuals who had been involved with the NTS. For the most part, this included employees at the test site, but it also included historians, protesters, photographers, and people living downwind from the blasts.\textsuperscript{32} I narrowed the select group of specific interviews to analyze based on three criteria. First, I only examined the interviews with people who were directly involved with the NTS in between 1951-1963; in other words, the 12-year time period during which the AEC conducted atmospheric tests. Second, I used the “Table of Contents” feature of each interview transcript to see which topics each individual discussed. I paid particularly close attention to interviews with people who mentioned, at least to some degree, their feelings and impressions when witnessing an actual atmospheric blast. Third, again using the “Table of Contents” feature, I read interview transcripts from people who also gave insight into how the city of Las Vegas played into their experience.

Although each interview transcript included different content, I asked the same set of questions when doing close readings of each transcript. Taking this methodological approach played a crucial role in linking my analysis and unifying my research. Some of the questions I asked included:

\begin{itemize}
  \item What were some of the main issues that underscored how this person discussed their experiences?
  \item How do they discuss the bomb tests, and what does that language reveal about their feelings about the tests?
  \item How do they discuss Las Vegas, and what does that language reveal about their feelings about the city?
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{32} The University of Nevada Test Site Oral History Project was dedicated to “documenting, preserving and disseminating the remembered past of persons affiliated with and affected by the Nevada Test Site during the era of Cold War nuclear testing.” For more information about the oral history project see “Nevada Test Site Oral History Project,” University of Nevada Las Vegas Digital Collections, 2008, accessed September 20, 2016, http://digital.library.unlv.edu/ntsohp/.
• What is most salient about this person’s oral history, and how does their experience help me answer my research question?

Some of the interviews gave me longer answers to these questions than others, but using this method gave me the opportunity to apply the same analysis to each oral history. This was very helpful, for an identical analysis threaded together what I found were a very diverse set of experiences.

One of the invaluable components of using oral histories as primary sources is the opportunity to analyze first person accounts and explore their memories. However, in doing this, it’s also imperative to recognize the potential shifts in the way people may actually remember these experiences. So, another important component of my methodology within this part of my research was placing the interviews in context. These individuals discussed their experiences with atomic bomb testing 50 years after the fact, so I made sure to read these oral histories critically and identify any places where the interviewees may have left problematic gaps in their narratives, or even reframed their language as a reflection of certain biases. This meant that I analyzed the specific language used by the interviewees both to deepen my analysis, but also to explore the legitimacy behind each and every statement they made.

The second part of my methodology involved analyzing images and objects from the city of Las Vegas. The sources I used for this part of my research came from three key places: The Las Vegas News Bureau, the University of Nevada Las Vegas Special Collections, and the National Atomic Testing Museum (NATM). Throughout the semester, I corresponded with representatives at the News Bureau and at the NATM, and the primary sources from UNLV were accessible digitally. Like with the NTS oral history transcripts, I asked a certain set of questions when examining these primary sources:

• How did elements of Las Vegas culture depict the bomb in the 1950s?
What do these depictions tell us about the narrative that the city projected onto people visiting the city?
If any forms of language accompany these depictions, how do they frame the bomb?

I also considered the form of the specific primary source, whether it was a postcard, showgirl outfit, photograph or object depicting the image of the mushroom cloud. This group of sources informed my understanding of the atomic bomb’s role within the actual culture of the city, which offered a valuable foil to the experience of Nevada Test Site workers.

The last primary sources that I examined were newspaper articles from the *Los Angeles Times* that discussed the atomic bomb tests. I used the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database to find these articles, as it has an archive of the *Los Angeles Times*. Specific terms that I used to search the database included “Las Vegas atomic bomb,” “Nevada Test Site,” “Nevada Proving Ground,” “atomic test site,” “Nevada atomic bomb,” and “Las Vegas tourism.” Most importantly, I narrowed down the time period of these articles to the 1950s and 1960s. I expanded my search to articles from the 1960s because even though the 1950s is the key decade I examine for this thesis, the above ground tests stretched until 1963, so the articles from those first three years of the decade played an important part in my research as well. I decided to use the *Los Angeles Times* because its readers were far enough away from the city of Las Vegas to view it as a tourist destination, but close enough to actually go visit and even occasionally witness a test from Los Angeles. Randlett wrote that Las Vegas’s distance from Los Angeles made it a prime tourist location for Los Angeles residents, and those individuals composed a significant portion of the tourists going to Vegas during the 1950s.33

The three key questions I asked when doing this part of my research were:

- In what ways did the *Los Angeles Times* frame the bomb tests to people living outside of Las Vegas?

• What types of language were used to describe the bomb tests, and how do they inform our understanding of the visions and ideas that people had when going to the city?
• How do *Times* articles place the bomb tests into the larger context of the Cold War and international conflict between the United States and Soviet Union?

Using *The Los Angeles Times* was one of the most interesting parts of this project, because the more articles I read, the more I realized how much the *Times* had to offer me in my research. I initially looked for articles solely discussing Las Vegas and the bomb tests, which provided a rich array of results. However, I soon began to also look at all coverage of the bomb tests, which offered me additional insights that showed how people visualized the atomic bomb during this time period. Another surprise in this portion of my research was that the atomic bomb tests were sometimes visible in Los Angeles, which was approximately 300 miles away from the test site.

The fourth part of my methodology focused on integrating all these findings together. This was initially challenging, because so many important themes tied together and separated all the different sources. I struggled with whether to focus primarily on the culture of the city, or to instead focus on the bomb itself. This was a place where I diverged slightly from my research question. In my research question, I asked specifically about the Las Vegas identity. Ultimately, my research led me to a conclusion about the collective consciousness of people in the greater Las Vegas region, whether that was in the heart of the city, at the NTS, or even as far as in Los Angeles. My methodology relied on the synthesis of a variety of sources, and the conclusion that I arrived at is interdisciplinary in a unique way.

Throughout my research, I took note of any gaps in my work or assumptions I made. One particular part of my work to address was my research into how people in Las Vegas perceived the bomb. The primary sources I analyzed to research this issue included its depiction in the city as well as how it was discussed in NTS oral history transcripts. In claiming that people in Las Vegas saw the bomb as something beautiful and entertaining, I make the assumption that the way
that I, as a researcher, interpreted depictions of the bomb directly aligns with how people interpreted them during the time period. I realize that this represents a slight gap in my research as well. While I have the first person testimonies from people who worked at the NTS, I did not engage with such types of sources from people actually in the city. Throughout this thesis project, I made sure to take these types of assumptions and gaps into account and address them to the best of my ability.

Chapter Overview

My first chapter, entitled “Patriotism on the Proving Ground” includes distinct sections each revealing a different component of the way that the bomb tests became associated with patriotism throughout the region. I begin by establishing the threats of radiation discussing the ways in which local institutions – specifically, the local government and AEC – presented radiation to local populations. I also discuss how NTS workers felt about the threat of radiation. I then unpack NTS workers’ specific language by analyzing their emphasis on American dominance, concern for world peace, and feelings of individual pride. I then briefly touch on how patriotic sentiment emerged within the city of Las Vegas. Lastly, I introduce how language in Los Angeles Times articles also echoed the presence of patriotic sentiment.

My second chapter, entitled “Economic and Atomic Booms on the Vegas Strip,” explores the economic impact of the test site. Business owners in the greater Las Vegas region initially feared that the tests would dissuade people from coming to the city, but they actually drew visitors to Las Vegas in large numbers. My evidence in this chapter engages with the lived experiences of NTS workers and their motivations for working at the test site. It also discusses the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce’s efforts to integrate the image of the bomb into the city’s tourist culture. This chapter primarily focuses on the idea that those in the greater Las Vegas area
embraced the bomb as a symbol of prosperity because it contributed to the economic boom so crucial to the growth of Las Vegas in the 1950s. Finally, I explain that while the atomic bomb fascinated Las Vegas residents, tourists and NTS workers, it also, over time, was normalized and became another part of daily life.

My third chapter, entitled “Spectacle, Privilege, and Intimacy: Reactions to the Mushroom Cloud,” details the spectrum of ways that people in the greater Las Vegas region interpreted the image of the mushroom cloud. I pin down the idea that on one end of this spectrum were the emotional responses to the bomb as an image that was both beautiful, yet also scary. Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum was an embrace of the bomb as an image that could function as an attractive object used to market certain goods. This chapter also argues that the interpretation of the bomb as beautiful and intriguing overpowered any feelings of fear or concern. My primary research also revealed that people who saw the tests felt intense feelings of gratitude and privilege, for they understood that few Americans would have the opportunity to see an atomic bomb test in their lifetimes.

Finally, my conclusion reviews my main argument and discusses how further scholarship could expand on my work. I found striking similarities between the proximity to danger for people who saw the bomb tests, and how Las Vegas tourists often partake in risky acts in the city today. I would be interested in a study bookending this time period with a component of Las Vegas contemporary culture. Connecting past events to current cultural themes would be helpful in locating these issues in present times. I conclude this thesis by asserting that this study is a valuable contribution to contemporary scholarship and enhances understanding of Cold War America.
CHAPTER I
Patriotism on the Proving Ground

“Working in the nuclear industry, we all thought we were being just terribly patriotic, you know, and anybody who didn’t like us was unpatriotic.” – Helen Draper, NTS Payroll Office Manager

In the above quote from a June 2004 interview, Helen Draper described how she and her coworkers felt about working at the Nevada Test Site. In doing so, she established a binary view of their experience. According to Draper, her and her colleagues’ work was so important to the United States that “anybody who didn’t like us” immediately became “unpatriotic.” Draper’s testimony, thus, shows the strong association between the atomic tests and patriotism. To her, working at the NTS meant that she was working to save the United States and maintain its superiority on the world stage. Draper’s statement reveals that patriotism was at the forefront of her mind and that this feeling has become one of her longest lasting memories. By saying that “we all thought we were being just terribly patriotic,” she affirmed the emerging sense of patriotism and unifying pride that connected the people who worked at the test site.

Background of Political Context

The NTS itself evolved alongside the escalating arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union in the post-World War II years. From 1945 to 1949, the United States stood on relatively secure footing. After it successfully detonated an atomic bomb on July 14, 1945 in the Trinity Test, it was the only country in the world to possess nuclear weapons. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings of August 6 and August 9, respectively, ended the war, but also served as statements of dominance over other highly developed countries pursuing nuclear weapons.

34 Helen Draper, interview by Joan Leavitt, June 24, 2004, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 15.


At its most basic level, the attack showcased the United States’ power as the strongest country to emerge out of World War II.

Toward the end of the decade, this level of global superiority shifted. After the Soviet Union successfully detonated an atomic bomb in 1949, the nuclear arms race was at full force. In an effort to improve and increase its nuclear stockpile, the United States embarked on a series of atomic tests at the Nevada Test Site. By January of 1951, atomic testing at the site just 65 miles north of Las Vegas had begun, with January 27, 1951 marking the first official test over a part of the desert called the Frenchman Flat. The first series of tests was called Operation Ranger, which stretched from January to February of 1951 and involved five bomb tests in total.

Over time, the NTS became a crucial component of the United States’ effort to maintain its nuclear supremacy. When the AEC informed people in Las Vegas about the tests, the organization emphasized that, “the proving ground was necessary to save time, money, and resources in developing new, more, and better weapons to keep ahead of the Russians and to ensure a continued, if nervous, peace.” According to Democratic Senator Brian McMahon from Connecticut, the atomic testing ground would “save precious weeks in making certain limited tests vital to weapons development.” McMahon’s position as a Connecticut senator

38 Fehner and Gosling, “Origins of the Nevada Test Site.”
40 Ibid, 58.
42 “Vast A-Bomb Testing Area Planned at Las Vegas,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 1951, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
demonstrates how the test site was nationally recognized as a key part of the United States’ pursuit of atomic superiority. Hence, the atomic bomb tests at the NTS were a part of a larger effort to ensure that other countries did not threaten the United States’ role as the strongest nation in the world. For people in Las Vegas, at the test site, and even as far as Los Angeles, the atmospheric tests at the NTS reaffirmed the United States’ role as a superior and technologically dominant nuclear power on the world stage. For this reason, the bomb transformed from merely an image emblematic of destruction into a symbol of prosperity and patriotism, which emerged through oral histories, newspaper articles, and cultural artifacts from Las Vegas.

With Truman’s decision to authorize the creation of the NTS, thousands of people flocked to a space that’s most attractive feature was its isolation. The communities that emerged in the Nevada desert near the test site, like Mercury, included stretches of quickly constructed buildings, cafeterias, dormitories and a beer hall. In their spare time, test site workers would play billiards, get together for card games, and dance. Even though many of the individuals working at the test site commuted each day, the space developed its own unique conditions and cultural dynamics. In this contained area, the atomic bomb and the mushroom cloud became the physical symbols attached to the work being done at the NTS.

Being in close proximity to ground zero placed these workers at a higher risk of being exposed to dangerous levels of radiation, especially for those who physically worked with the tools used to set up atomic tests. With that said, the NTS workers’ testimonies show that there was little knowledge of radiation. The government disclosed minimal information about the true

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43 Fehner and Gosling’s documentation of the origins of the Nevada Test Site includes a brief discussion of how the isolation of the site made it the ideal location to create a test site within the continental United States.

nature of radioactive fallout, and NTS workers had barely any comprehensive understanding of what would happen if exposed. This lacking awareness gave people the space to develop an intimacy with the atomic bomb. Their participation in a patriotic cause devoted to maintaining American dominance led the employees to feel excited and proud to assist in this effort. Without full awareness of the risks they took, their pride in participating in this important work overpowered any sense of fear or concern about radiation or their safety.

The Threat of Radiation

In early January of 1951, the Atomic Energy Commission announced to the general public that it would begin atomic testing by the end of the month. In a January 12, 1951, article, the Los Angeles Times reported that, “The Atomic Energy Commission announced today it will use a vast Nevada area near Las Vegas for a proving ground to speed up development of atomic weapons, indicating it has mastered a method of small-scale explosion tests.”\(^{45}\) The article added that, “‘all necessary precaution will be taken’ — such as radiation surveys and patrolling of the surrounding area.”\(^{46}\) This report set a precedent that the AEC dedicated resources to protecting the people in the surrounding areas from any possible risks. Therefore, a relationship of trust developed. In reading and hearing the AEC’s commitment to being careful, most people in the area – and especially people at the test site – did not feel unsafe.

In regard to radiation, Norma Cox, an administrator with the AEC and Public Health Service, recalled that “we were taught to respect it and we had film badges. I guess I gave them a lot more confidence than I have in recent years.”\(^{47}\) Cox juxtaposed her contemporary perception

\(^{45}\) “Vast A-Bomb Testing Area Planned at Las Vegas.”

\(^{46}\) Ibid.

of radiation with her understanding of it whilst working at the test site and recognized that she no longer felt as trusting as she did in the 1950s. George and Theresa Maynard both worked at the test site, with George involved in weapons operations and Theresa working at the security badge office. Like Cox, they both recognized radiation’s threat but also had no idea how large that threat was, nor how to prevent themselves from being exposed. Theresa Maynard said, “I knew it was dangerous. I just didn’t know how much or where you were or how close you had to be or how much was all around you.” George Maynard said, “From the military standpoint we had minimal training, and they didn’t really know a lot about the hazards of radiation. And their monitoring process wasn’t really that great.” One of these monitoring methods was the usage of film badges that people at the NTS could attach to their clothing. Readings on the badge would indicate exposure, although whether or not the badges could successfully detect lower levels of radiation was questionable. Cox and the Maynards’ little knowledge of radiation made it challenging to genuinely become concerned about exposure.

Draper and Raymond Harbert, both of whom worked at the NTS, recall a naiveté among all parties during this time period. There were health issues plaguing certain people who worked at the site, but Draper convinced herself that they were not caused by radiation: “At the time I told myself, as many of the people there do, that that wasn’t the cause of it, that it had to be something else. Now I think that the government and the people and the scientists and the doctors were all a little naïve about the effects of radiation.” Harbert, when reflecting on his

48 George and Theresa Maynard, interview by Mary Palevsky, January 26, 2004, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 23.
51 Draper, interview, 27.
experience, still felt uneasy about the way that the AEC and the government approached the issue of radiation. He explained, “One of the things that has always bothered me, in retrospect, is [that] radiation was played down. They knew radiation had effects.”52 When approaching the issue of radiation with the general public, Harbert remembered that the AEC explained that even when a body did get exposed to radiation, humans would have the ability to absorb it without issue. Specifically, he said, “The Atomic Energy Commission at that time really did not realize the problems, although we’d live in some background radiation all the time. They said your system would just absorb it and you would mutate through it without any problem.”53 He added, “the education program regarding radiation was basically that your system would assimilate it and that there wasn’t anything to worry about.”54 Overall, these NTS workers demonstrated minimal awareness of radiation when they worked at the test site, even if they obtained a better understanding of its risks later on in life.

Other documents show that fear of radiation was not only seen as irrational, but also that it could also be detrimental to the mission of the NTS. One Los Angeles Times opinion writer argued that being worried about fallout and radiation would be counterproductive to the United States’ attempts to maintain its position as the most superior power in the world. The article first stated, “All experts agree that the measured intensity of last Thursday’s radiation would not impair health unless it remained at that level for at least a year, which is impossible.”55 It went on

52 Raymond Harbert, interview by Mary Palevsky, July 15, 2005, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 4.

53 Raymond Harbert, interview by Mary Palevsky, February 18, 2005, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 18.

54 Ibid, 22.

55 “The Danger of ‘Fear Fall-Out,’” Los Angeles Times, November 2, 1958, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
to say that people who wanted to ban tests because of concerns about radiation were naïve, emotional and insensitive to the realities of the Cold War:

Advocates of such one-sided test bans direct their appeals to emotionalism and naïveté. They seek to ‘protect’ the world from a test radiation ‘menace’ but in reality threaten to replace minute dosage of radioactivity for all destroying thermonuclear blasts over every American city and defense target. The only other alternative for the United States if it surrendered all atomic advantage to Russia would be to live as a third or fourth-rate power in the world-wide shadow of the Kremlin.56

This quote compares the danger of radiation with the risks associated with the Soviet Union possessing a more extensive arsenal of nuclear weapons than the United States. The writer conveyed the message that minimal levels of radiation were insignificant compared to what could happen if the United States became a “third or fourth-rate power” on a global scale. This message, then, prioritizes the bomb tests and their role in maintaining the United States military dominance over the potential harmful consequences of being exposed to radioactive fallout.

As a result of public statements from the AEC and local governments, most people in the Las Vegas region barely recognized radiation as a threat. As Las Vegas News Bureau photographer Donald English explained:

We were very trusting. I don’t recall anybody saying, ‘Listen, I think I’m going to be radiated, or I’m going to get some gams.’ They gave us badges that were supposed to detect any radiation and we would wear them and then turn them in at the end of the time. I never heard of anyone being called saying, ‘Gee, you were radiated.’ But we just — kind of the age of innocence and everybody believed what was going on.57

English reflected on his experiences as a separate moment in time during which people were innocent and unaware of radioactive fallout’s threat to human health. Frankie Lou Mayer was an

56 “The Danger of Fear Fall-Out.”

employee in the insurance department of Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company (REECo). When asked about her thoughts on radiation, she put it simply. Interviewer Shannon Applegate inquired, “Do you think it was pretty safe out at the test site?” Mayer responded, “I do.” Applegate continued, “So there wasn’t undue hazard out there?” Mayer again responded curtly: “No.”58 These statements — while perhaps in part because Mayer’s primary responsibility was identifying whether insurance claims involving health concerns were valid — demonstrate a complete dismissal of any of the threats associated with working at the NTS.

Draper boiled down radiation from an insidious threat capable of causing lifelong health issues to the equivalent of the threats of working in factories: “I don’t think they’re any worse off than people who worked in coal mines and didn’t realize what coal dust did, or people who worked in factories and didn’t realize that the dust from those fabrics was insidious and gave you all kinds of emphysema and stuff.”59 In grouping the potential harmful consequences of being in close proximity to the tests with the typical risks associated with working in a factory setting, Draper eliminated any recognition of radiation as a particularly harmful threat to her and her coworkers.

Overall, people believed the AEC’s assurances that radiation was not a genuine issue. In the 1950s, the threat of radiation was essentially absent from most people’s minds. Fifty years after working at the site, NTS workers and Las Vegas residents’ reflections on radiation show the way in which it was downplayed. This lacking awareness, then, allowed them to have a different type of relationship with the bomb: one that involved feelings of pride and patriotism.

American Dominance


59 Draper, interview, 27.
In many ways, NTS workers believed that they played an integral role in the Cold War, as being proactive in combatting the Soviet Union’s rapid weapons development became central to the test site’s mission.\textsuperscript{60} By being a part of that effort, NTS workers thought that they were helping to protect their country. Harbert, an engineer, said: “I’d heard about the Trinity shot, heard a little bit about what went on at Nevada, particular the Cannon shot out here. But it was anticipation. I’m going to be part of a great experience. I’m part of the Cold War. I’m helping my country. I’m devoted to what I’m doing. And fortunately I was playing a key role. I was not just an observer.”\textsuperscript{61} Harbert’s repetitive usage of ‘I’ statements demonstrates the personal attachment he felt to the bomb tests. He called working at the NTS a “great experience,” and explicitly said that he was helping his country.

Jerry Claborn, an employee at REECo, explained that the test site was crucial to ensuring the country’s safety: “We did a wonderful job. And you know, we was part of securing the whole United States of America, and we’re kind of proud of that, too.”\textsuperscript{62} Not only did Claborn express that he and his colleagues were proud of being part of this effort, but he also clearly said that they did a “wonderful job.”\textsuperscript{63} In using this language, Claborn associated his work with a noble cause. Even more interestingly, when Claborn first was looking for a job, he said that “I didn’t even know what a nuclear weapon was. All I was looking for was a job and I didn’t care what it was.”\textsuperscript{64} The fact that Claborn remembers his participation in the project with such pride —

\textsuperscript{60} Titus, \textit{Bombs in the Backyard: Atomic Testing and American Politics}, 55.

\textsuperscript{61} Harbert, interview, February 18, 2005.

\textsuperscript{62} Jerry Claborn, interview by Mary Palevsky, July 30, 2004, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 42.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, 42.

\textsuperscript{64} Claborn, interview, 50.
despite initially knowing nothing about atomic bombs — demonstrates that working at the test site heavily influenced how workers understood their personal contribution to protecting the United States on a greater level.

Harold Cunningham, one of the general managers with REECo, explained his views on how their work fit into the international context of the Cold War: “I saw a real threat from the Soviet Union, and I felt, you know, we got to keep and surpass the Soviet Union . . . I think [the tests] became more important as the Soviet Union developed more weapons, more missiles, and our defense budget increased because of the real threat during the Cold War.” 65 Cunningham’s testimony directly references the tests as an integral component of ensuring that the United States remained dominant over the Soviet Union. The rising prowess of the Soviet Union’s weapons development became a concrete threat to the United States, and Cunningham’s statement reveals how that phenomenon shifted people’s individual perceptions of their work.

Robert Hahn, an employee of Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier [EG&G] — a defense contracting company — also showed how NTS workers recognized the importance behind their work: “We just knew that this is what we need to do and somebody else needed to determine how this fits into their overall development process. . . . We just knew that we were supporting this work and knew it was important.” 66 Hahn not only recognized that his work at the NTS was important, but he also associated the NTS with the country’s security as a whole. He understood that someone needed to do this work, and he and his colleagues felt prepared to step into that role.

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65 Harold Cunningham, interview by Mary Palevsky, March 11, 2004, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Santa Fe, NM, 46.

66 Robert Hahn, interview by Mary Palevsky, October 29, 2004, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 16.
Finally, Ernest Williams, a logistics manager at the test site, also referenced the tests’ significance on a national level: “It’s been a great program. It’s been, in my humble feeling, a great effort for the defense of our country and a great deterrent for this nation.”\textsuperscript{67} Williams repeatedly called the testing program great, specifically stating that it operated as a safeguard for the United States and a key component of the country’s deterrence strategy.\textsuperscript{68} These testimonies revealed that when evaluating their experiences, Harbert, Claborn, Cunningham, Hahn and Williams remember their work as fundamental to the United States’ security in the Cold War era.

**Global Safety**

This belief that the test site played a crucial role in keeping the country safe extended past the United States. NTS workers believed that in working at the test site, they also contributed to the maintenance of world peace and stability. They thought that if the United States stayed ahead of the Soviet Union in the development of nuclear weapons, then the entire world would be a safer place. Theresa Maynard said: “Yes, it would be very devastating where it was used, and we just hoped and prayed that they never did have use it. But then on the other hand, you were glad that they were doing things like this because we do need protection, you know, for our world too.”\textsuperscript{69} Maynard’s statement reveals an inner negotiation that she experienced during her time working at the NTS. She reconciled with the destructive nature of the bomb by arguing that the United States needed to develop the weapon to protect the world. By working at the test site,

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\textsuperscript{67} Ernest Williams, interview by Joan Leavitt, October 27, 2004, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV, 59.

\textsuperscript{68} For more information about the strategy of deterrence during the nuclear age, see Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

\textsuperscript{69} George and Theresa Maynard, interview, 11.
Maynard saw that the United States was taking an active role in defining its future and ensuring that the world was a peaceful place.

John Hopkins, one of the test directors, felt similarly. He explained his stance by detailing the specific way in which the United States’ work on the atomic bomb prevented warfare: “I think that nuclear weapons made the world safer for the last half of the twentieth century. . . . It probably prevented a potentially awful conventional war in Europe again.” Hopkins added, “It’s kind of frightening to think of what World War II might’ve turned out like if we’d really had to invade Japan.” Hopkins’ statement locates the test site within the broader context of global history. One of the primary reasons why the United States dropped the atomic bombs rather than invade mainland Japan was because this invasion would have likely cost thousands more American lives. His testimony also reaffirms the idea that with the most advanced weapons, the world would be more prosperous.

In summary, the tests reassured Maynard and Hopkins of two key ideas. First, conducting atomic bomb tests represented a proactive approach to combatting the increasing levels of anxiety about atomic attack and the nuclear arms race. Second, they believed that making sure that the United States was the country with the most advanced atomic weaponry would ensure global safety. Therefore, the bomb tests amplified a strong patriotic sentiment among test site workers that not only emerged from a desire to protect the United States, but also a duty to protect the entire world.

70 John Hopkins, interview by Mary Palevsky, April 11, 2005, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Los Alamos, NM, 34.

71 Ibid, 34.

Individual Pride

Regardless of the positions that these people held at the test site – ranging from secretaries to chemists to engineers – being a part of this project inspired senses of pride. Draper acknowledged the men actively working on the bombs, calling them “patriots.”

She specifically said: “I think the men that worked out there were great patriots. I think they worked out there without thinking of themselves.” She viewed her peers as selfless individuals playing key roles in upholding the United States’ role as the most superior nuclear power on the world stage.

Peggy Bostian, an administrative assistant at REECo, expressed a similar stance. She remembered the test site fondly, calling it “our wonderful project.” Bostian explained that “not all jobs give the feeling that we’re doing great things, we’re going to be accomplishing things that will help the whole country, and I have missed that element.”

Bostian reflected upon the time she worked at the test site with nostalgia and implied that working there became one of the most rewarding experiences of her lifetime. Because they were doing “great things” and “accomplishing things that will help the whole country,” Bostian felt a deep sense of pride by working there, even though her position involved little contribution to the tests themselves.

Harbert spoke to this phenomenon on behalf of many of his co-workers at the site. He explained that as a unit, “we were extremely patriotic; we had come home, the Cold War was on, and we looked at ourselves as warriors of the Cold War and we were doing something extremely

73 Draper, interview, 29.
74 Ibid, 29.
75 Bostian, interview, 33.
76 Ibid, 14.
important to protect our country and working for the president.” Harbert’s use of the word “we” demonstrates the pride that unified many of the test site workers.

Draper and Bostian felt fulfilled by working at the test site. The development of atomic weapons, and their roles within that effort – regardless of how minimal they were – instilled a deep sense of patriotism. Harbert not only characterized himself and his colleagues as warriors, but he believed that they were directly assisting the president. For these test site workers, the tests represented a patriotic effort and made them feel incredibly proud.

Overall, the test site employees saw their work at the NTS as a crucial component of the greater effort to maintain American dominance in the world. The NTS workers’ lacking knowledge about the harm associated with radiation gave them the space to develop an intimacy with the bomb revolving around individual pride and fulfillment. Engaging with atomic bomb tests in this space, thus, transformed the bomb itself into a symbol of prosperity.

Las Vegas

The city of Las Vegas also demonstrated the patriotic sentiment associated with the tests. Before the 1950s, the Las Vegas economy rested on a questionable foundation. The city’s reliance on gambling and tolerance of the mob and prostitution did not bode well for its reputation. The political significance of the tests stood in stark contrast to these dark undertones of Las Vegas society, and the city gained legitimation through its subsequent embrace of the bomb tests as part of a patriotic and noble cause. English described how the city felt about hosting the tests: “It was a lot of pride. We were hosting all these people and we

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77 Harbert, interview, July 15, 2005, 4.
78 Glass, Nevada’s Turbulent ’50s: Decade of Political and Economic Change, 5, 12.
thought that we were in whatever way contributing to the national security. . . At that time, everybody was all for it.”80 The Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce understood how the city could benefit from the bomb tests.81 One Los Angeles Times article published just two weeks after the tests began displayed the Chamber of Commerce’s appreciation for the site:

Even the Chamber of Commerce takes a positive position. ‘These tests certainly haven’t hurt Las Vegas,’ said J. R. McQuillkin, managing director for the Las Vegas Chamber. ‘We’ve grateful Nevada is able to provide the facilities for these tests. We want to lend our support to national defense.’82

The Chamber of Commerce’s willingness to support the test site showed how Las Vegas connected the tests to American security and stability.

Las Vegas residents from a variety of backgrounds recognized the meaning behind the tests. One reverend from the city discussed the power of the bomb in divine language: “Rev. Thomas J. Daly, pastor of the Reformation United Lutheran Church, wrote out this statement at the Little Chapel Around the Corner, which never closes. ‘When I am awakened at dawn by the atom bomb explosions, I thank God that the bomb is in good hands. This startling demonstration of such tremendous power is a keen reminder of Almighty God, the source of all power.”83 Seeing bomb tests actually comforted Daly, as it reminded him that the United States was the country that possessed the most highly developed weapons, and that the bomb was in “good hands.”

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80 English, interview, 12.


83 Ibid.
Casinos and hotels welcomed American soldiers who came to the area for drills with large billboards that said, “Welcome Atomic Soldiers” [See Appendix Figure 1].\textsuperscript{84} Going into the city in uniform would often allow these ‘atomic soldiers’ into bars and casinos at discounted prices, as Williams remembered: “We would see the show and we’d go out on the Strip and we would see, you know, some of the entertainers that we wanted to see. We’d always go in uniform. If you didn’t go in uniform, then yes, you had to pay the maitre d’ and a few other tips here and there to get in.”\textsuperscript{85} The way that local institutions in Las Vegas rewarded those who worked at the test site demonstrated the city’s value of the tests.

\textbf{Los Angeles}

The association of patriotism with the atomic bomb was not isolated to the NTS, nor Las Vegas. Los Angeles was located 300 miles southwest of the test site. At this time, Los Angeles residents composed a large portion of the Las Vegas tourist base. As Randlett writes, “Proximity and accessibility to Los Angeles brought to Las Vegas both permanent and transient escapees. Los Angeles was the primary source of Las Vegas’s visitors, entrepreneurs, and entertainers until quite recently.”\textsuperscript{86} Over the course of the 1950s, the tests earned a significant amount of coverage in Los Angeles newspaper journalism.

Like in Las Vegas and at the NTS, Los Angeles residents were not alerted the legitimate dangers associated with radioactive fallout. One \textit{Los Angeles Times} article entitled “U.S. Experts Doubt Peril of Fallout” includes an interesting testimony from Dr. Willard Libby, a “scientist

\textsuperscript{84} Las Vegas News Bureau, “Atomic soldiers arriving Royal Nevada,” April 18, 1954, Las Vegas, NV.

\textsuperscript{85} Williams, interview, 42.

member of the Atomic Energy Commission.” Under the header “Effect Held Small,” the author of the article wrote: “Libby agrees that either kind of fallout, the fresh from small weapons or the long-delayed settling from large weapons, must have some effect on people. But compared with the effect natural radiation, such as cosmic rays, it is very small.” Libby acknowledged the existence of radiation and stated that it could affect human health, but he also normalized it by stating that it was no worse than the radiation already existent in the atmosphere. In doing so, he reinforced the idea that fear of fallout from the tests was unnecessary.

Times articles published in the early-1950s emphasized the importance of the atomic bomb tests. Walter Millis, one of the reporters assigned to cover the tests, wrote in a 1952 article that, “Our growing atomic wealth is indicated by the fact that 15 bombs have been fired at the proving ground alone (out of the 30, including three in Russia, which have been discharged by man). Atomic weaponry is a big enterprise.” This article stated that the test site program contributed to the country’s growing “wealth” in the realm of atomic weapons development, showing that the site was directly tied to prosperity. Articles would also praise test site workers, calling them “intensely earnest men who are carrying the tremendous and difficult responsibilities of the atomic program.” Another 1952 article that described an especially intense blast called the image of the mushroom cloud a “man-made sunrise,” which sends the

87 “U.S. Experts Doubt Peril of Fallout: All Radioactivity from Tests to Date Described as Small,” Los Angeles Times, April 21, 1957, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

88 Ibid.

89 Walter Millis, “Public Peek at A-Bomb Desired in Nevada Blast,” Los Angeles Times, May 2, 1952, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; It is worthwhile to note that the test site has also been referred to as the “Nevada proving ground” in primary source material as well as contemporary scholarship.

90 Millis, “Public Peek at A-Bomb Desired in Nevada Blast.”
message that the people involved in the test site created an incredibly powerful technology. These types of articles emphasized the human component of the bomb; that it was a product of human excellence and intelligence, and that producing a weapon of mass destruction was challenging, yet incredibly important work.

Furthermore, Los Angeles used the tests as opportunities to conduct drills in the case of an actual nuclear attack. One article explained that, “Sirens of Los Angeles will sound an ‘alert America’ 10 minutes before the dropping of an atomic bomb tomorrow morning at the Nevada Proving Grounds. Mayor Bowron has proclaimed the day as ‘It Could Happen Here Day’ — to remind citizens of the potential dangers of atomic warfare.” Civil defense drills played an integral role in training civilian populations the procedures in the case of a nuclear attack, and the city’s usage of the tests as part of this effort made citizens safer. In framing these drills as effective preparation for a potential attack, Los Angeles subsequently affirmed that the tests could improve their safety and security in the nuclear age. Another Los Angeles Times article reinforced the connection between American superiority and the atomic bomb. In an article reporting on how one Los Angeles television station broadcast the tests, the author wrote that, “Yesterday’s atomic explosion over the Nevada desert — a May Day exclamation of American might — was viewed by thousands of persons in the Southland by television.”

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92 “Blast of Siren Will Herald A-Bomb Test,” Los Angeles Times, April 21, 1951, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.


“American might” directly ties to the idea of American nuclear superiority, and echoes the patriotic sentiment core to people’s perception of the atomic tests. Without an explicit recognition of the harm associated with radioactive fallout, it was easy to associate the tests with patriotism and “American might,” rather than fear or danger.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the attitudes about the tests from across the greater Las Vegas region reveals the strong sense of patriotic sentiment attached to the atmospheric bomb tests. These feelings emerged within the testimonies of the test site workers, but also appeared on the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*. Las Vegas embraced its role as the closest metropolitan area to the bomb tests, and, like NTS workers, felt that it contributed to the greater effort to maintain American dominance by hosting the test site. The tests reassured people that the United States was taking a proactive role in defining its own military future. It recognized the threat of the Soviet Union and anticipated the potential conflict that could emerge during the Cold War era. In being involved in the NTS and seeing the tests themselves, people in the greater Las Vegas area interpreted the bomb as a symbol of patriotism, for it reaffirmed their belief that the United States was a prosperous nation capable of maintaining its military strength on the world stage.
CHAPTER II
Economic and Atomic Booms on the Vegas Strip

“But Las Vegas became an attraction for all people, and they came from all over to watch it.”95 – Raymond Harbert, NTS Engineer

Raymond Harbert began his career working in the atomic industry in the Pacific. After several years, he eventually joined the workforce at the Nevada Test Site. Harbert’s tenure in the testing industry gave him the opportunity to see the way in which the growth of the NTS heightened people’s interest in witnessing atomic tests. In the above quote, he explained how Las Vegas was an attraction because people came to watch “it:” it being, the eruption of a mushroom cloud into the Nevada sky. This observation is especially important, considering the fact that the 1950s marked the growth of the region as a whole and the test site was a driving force in that development.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Las Vegas was a relatively small city.96 However, according to English, it always possessed the environment of a larger space: “Las Vegas was a small town with a kind of big town atmosphere. The population was twenty-five thousand. When you would drive by Sills Drive-In, you had a pretty good idea who was there because you recognized the cars. It was a small town.”97 As the 1950s went on, it truly did become a larger, more dynamic and engaging city. In addition to the test site reaffirming the United States’ role as the most dominant nuclear power in the world, it also grew the economy by creating hundreds of jobs and increasing tourism in Las Vegas. The tests thrilled visiting tourists, and over the course of the decade, the bomb became another part of the tourist experience.

96 “History of Las Vegas”; In the year 1950, Las Vegas had a population of just 24,624. By 1960, the population had increased to 64,405.
97 English, interview, 2.
Nevada politicians anticipated that residents would welcome the tests because of the “potential contribution to the economy.”\textsuperscript{98} Indeed, the tests improved the area’s economy significantly. In their detailed study of Las Vegas history, Denton and Morris write that, “By the close of the decade, a permanent and growing nuclear weapons, military, and intelligence bureaucracy spawned by the Test Site had become a pillar of the southern Nevada economy, supplying thousands of jobs and a particularly plump national security payroll of both federal positions and allied contracting.”\textsuperscript{99} Nevada historian Eugene Moehring writes that, “The 1951 opening of the Nevada Proving Grounds for nuclear testing invigorated the northwest sector of Las Vegas valley, as scientists, support staff, and supply trucks increasingly plied the two-lane road connecting Las Vegas to Camp Mercury.”\textsuperscript{100} Theresa Maynard mentioned that there were thousands of military personnel who travelled to the area because of the bomb tests.\textsuperscript{101} Meanwhile, Draper said that one point, there were as many as 7,000 people on the REECo payroll.\textsuperscript{102}

**The Growth of the Test Site**

The sudden need for labor at the NTS brought hordes of wage earning workers to the area. From clerical employees to technicians to scientists, the test site’s functionality relied on individuals with a variety of different professional backgrounds. For many test site workers, the


\textsuperscript{101} George and Theresa Maynard, interview.

\textsuperscript{102} Draper, interview, 42.
motivations for moving to the area revolved around higher wages and the opportunity to achieve financial stability. The feelings of pride and patriotism that added meaning to their work emerged later on. But, in the beginning, the attraction of working at the test site was mostly based on financial opportunity. Cox’s husband encouraged her to work for the AEC because it offered more competitive pay, while Harbert left his family behind in Burbank, California, for higher wages.¹⁰³ Within a decade of the test site’s founding, 12,000 people would be commuting to the site from Las Vegas and the wages of all the workers combined annually amounted to over $100 million.¹⁰⁴

Scholars of Las Vegas history recognize that the establishment of the test site paralleled the evolution of the Las Vegas strip. Randlett argues that in examining Las Vegas’s complex past, scholars must look at these two events as deeply related trends — not as mutually exclusive events that coincidentally happened at the same time.¹⁰⁵ The Las Vegas economy and the city’s size grew significantly during the 1950s, and the NTS played a large role in that expansion. The atomic business was substantial during this time period, for keeping up with the Soviets in the arms race required a large workforce.¹⁰⁶ As the *Los Angeles Times*’ Marvin Miles wrote,

> It’s a tremendous business, unique in development, growth, national importance, international stature — with an apparently unlimited future. What other business has attained AEC’s size and eminence in such a few short years? After considering this vast organization and its vital responsibilities to the nation for both war and peace, it’s strange to think that it is built on the smallest unit to which an element can be divided.¹⁰⁷

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¹⁰³ Cox, interview, 1; Harbert, interview, July 15, 2005, 1.


¹⁰⁷ Marvin Miles, “Peaceful Atom: AEC is Vast and Complex,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 1960, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
This sizable industry created thousands of jobs previously nonexistent in the region. In her *Las Vegas Sun* article discussing this component of Nevada’s history, Mary Manning wrote that, “The Test Site was the second largest employer in Nevada during its peak years, behind the mining industry, according to Energy Department records. The casino industry came in a distant third.”108 Some test site workers had been previously involved in weapons development, but many entered this industry with little experience. When Draper’s husband began working at the test site in the 1950s, she got a job as a cashier in Indian Springs in order to avoid boredom during the days he was gone. Shortly thereafter, a store patron encouraged her to work at the test site in the payroll office.109 Draper was not regularly exposed to the atomic bombs, but her story reveals the way in which ordinary Americans found their way into the NTS workforce.

Peggy Bostian grew up in Las Vegas and attended high school in the mid-1950s, only to join the workforce at the NTS after graduation in 1958. For her, the tests had become a normal part of life by the time she began working at the site: “We had been so familiar to test site activity, simply being residents of Las Vegas, even though I was very young. . . We got used to it. Someone’s parents would work out at the test site, so it just became something we were familiar with.”110 As a Las Vegas resident, the tests were a part of Bostian’s upbringing. The NTS’s effect on the local economy in Las Vegas made the tests a normal part of life for Bostian, and this theme continued into her time as an employee there.

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109 Draper, interview.

110 Bostian, interview, 3.
The influx of workers with stories similar to Draper’s led to the creation of communities like Mercury and population growth in Indian Springs.\footnote{Titus, \textit{ Bombs in the Backyard: Atomic Testing and American Politics}, 56.} Harbert described the lifestyle in Mercury, saying that, “Mercury was interesting because it was a self-sustained city. We had theaters, we had a small hospital, medical supplies, we had mechanical sheds there for automotive repair, almost everything you could think about. There were theaters, there was a steakhouse, there was a bar.”\footnote{Harbert, interview, July 15, 2005, 1.} Living conditions were sparse, as Harbert’s testimony shows: “We lived in a barracks. I had a room; there were two cots in it and I had it by myself until the test series started. Mercury was pretty much just construction people up until just prior to the series beginning, when the scientists and technicians came in on test support.”\footnote{Ibid, 2.} Bostian compared Mercury to a small city, adding that it was “kind of a plain place and out in the middle of a desert.”\footnote{Bostian, interview, 8.} Harbert and Bostian’s testimonies reveal that Mercury, although in a convenient location, was extremely isolated and did not offer high-quality accommodations.

In fact, the conditions at Mercury often drove workers to live elsewhere. When asked about how the dorms were at Mercury, Cox responded simply by saying: “Ehh.”\footnote{Cox, interview, 41.} She said that the men’s and women’s dorms — which were separate — were equally mediocre. George Maynard explained that “personal facilities like restrooms were almost nonexistent. It was somewhat of a hardship, you know, you [were] living in a barren desert.”\footnote{George and Theresa Maynard, interview, 13.} Robert Hahn, a
technician at the NTS, said in his interview that, “There were limited living facilities at the test site, so people drove back and forth every day.”

The Maynards spent hours driving, as Theresa Maynard explained: “After we got married, there was no place for either one to live together so we rented an apartment in Las Vegas and we drove every day, 140 miles back and forth for a couple, three months.”

Getting to the NTS itself was quite dangerous, but for commuters, the benefits outweighed the risks. The two-lane highway that brought people to the test site earned the nickname of “Widowmaker,” because, as Cox said, “so many people got killed going back and forth out there.”

This was mostly because the surrounding landscape distracted drivers, leading people to get into accidents. Nonetheless, because there were so few facilities available to couples like the Maynards, they lived in Las Vegas and chose to commute hundreds of miles every day along treacherous roads like “Widowmaker.” Many people elected to live in the surrounding areas rather than live near the test site, which contributed to the economic growth in the greater Las Vegas region.

Additionally, NTS employees became frequent patrons of the casinos and hotels in Las Vegas. The city offered a valuable respite from the challenging work at the NTS, especially for those who lived out near the site. Draper explained that, “A lot of people, men and women, would stay there [Las Vegas] on Saturday or Sunday night. They would work out at the test site and live in the dorms out there, which at that time were barely habitable. Then they would come in and go to the El Cortez and have a room, and eat there, and play there, and drink there, and

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117 Hahn, interview, 19.
118 George and Theresa Maynard, interview, 7.
119 Cox, interview, 26.
120 Ibid, 26.
then go back out to the test site” [See Appendix Figure 2].\textsuperscript{121} Even though people would stay near the test site during the week, the proximity to Las Vegas gave them the option to take time off on the weekends and relax in a more luxurious space. Harbert said that, “Most of the people, if they could, would take off and go down to Las Vegas on the weekends: get your paycheck and go down there. And some of them would go down and blow the whole week’s paycheck and they’d have to hitchhike back to Mercury.”\textsuperscript{122} Therefore, the bomb tests not only brought jobs to the area, but the people in those positions contributed to the city’s economy as patrons of local businesses.

\textbf{The Atomic Bomb and Las Vegas Tourism}

The NTS’s large labor force was not the only factor that contributed to the economic growth in the area. This process also extended into the Las Vegas tourist industry, despite initial fears that the site would hurt this branch of the city’s economy. In its “atomic culture” exhibit, the NATM includes an excerpt from Georgia Lewis’ — a Las Vegas resident — diary in January 1951. In the diary, she wrote: “The Atomic bomb! No one asked us what we thought about it. Everyone is in an uproar, for none of our officials know anything about this. All the gambling people are furious, for, naturally, they fear that people will no longer come here.”\textsuperscript{123} To Lewis, the bomb tests posed a risk to Las Vegas’s growing enterprise. She and other Las Vegans believed that the creation of the test site would hurt the city’s economic growth – especially in terms of revenue from the tourist industry.

\textsuperscript{121} Draper, interview, 16.
\textsuperscript{122} Harbert, interview, February 18, 2005, 31.
\textsuperscript{123} Georgia Lewis, excerpt from “Las Vegas...The Way It Was: Diary of a Pioneer Woman” in the Atomic Culture Exhibit, National Museum of Atomic Testing, Las Vegas, NV.
However, she and the “gambling people” incorrectly predicted that the bomb tests would dissuade visitors from coming to Las Vegas. In fact, the appeal of the bomb tests and people’s fascination with atomic technology attracted many tourists to the region. Denton and Morris categorize the groups of people who came to Las Vegas to see the bomb as “bomb tourists,” indicating that these weapons were one of the most powerful draws to the city during this time period.\textsuperscript{124} As Randlett writes, “The Chamber of Commerce did its utmost to ensure that the enormous amount of publicity attendant upon the tests redounded to Las Vegas’ benefit, and images and evocations of mushroom cloud pervaded the promotional materials, events, slogans and gimmicks of the early 1950s.”\textsuperscript{125} Scott Pruett argues in his thesis that Las Vegas always thrived because of its ability to “supply visitors with an endless dose of pleasurable sensory stimuli through a variety of delivery systems,” and that is exactly what the city did when integrating the atomic bomb into the tourist culture.\textsuperscript{126}

Randlett explains that, “After the initial detonation assuaged those fears, tourists poured into town; before the first series was over, the shots themselves became secondary to dawn parties, atomic hairdos, and new games of betting on the date and time of the detonation.”\textsuperscript{127} People would stand outside of their hotels and look off into the distance beside hotel pools to witness the eruption of a mushroom cloud in the distance [See Appendix Figures 3, 4]. Many hotels took guests to see the tests in buses, while others held “dawn parties” so visitors could

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Denton and Morris, \textit{The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America, 1947-2000}, 140.
\end{itemize}
celebrate prior to witnessing a test in the distance. The Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce also provided tourists with maps of the best viewing locations and calendars so they knew when tests would happen. A series of atomic-themed entertainment locations emerged during the 1950s, ranging from an Atomic Motel to an Atomic Café. One hotel labeled Elvis Presley “the atomic powered singer” when he traveled to Las Vegas to perform for visitors. Professionals who visited to see the tests — journalists, AEC officials, and photographers – would also frequent some of Las Vegas’s “many entertainments” while they were in the area.

Harbert elaborated on the way that the tests drew people to the city: “Nevada used the tests as a magnet to draw people to the casinos. They published the dates. People came from Los Angeles, all over, to be in one of the hotels downtown or on top of them and look at them.” In order to see the tests, people in the city actually had to “stand on buildings in the gambling resort.” English observed the same trend as Harbert, explaining that, “It had to have an effect on tourism because Las Vegas was in the headlines almost every day. Another thing that happened was that, we had as a I said press from all over the United States, all over the world out here and they were on pretty big expense accounts . . . Everybody was looking for any kind of

130 Larry Gragg, Bright Light City: Las Vegas in Popular Culture (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2013), 142.
131 Ibid, 142.
sidebar, any kind of story on Las Vegas. So it was just a bonanza for us.” As a resident of Las Vegas, English saw firsthand the way that the bomb tests intrigued people and increased their awareness of the city. One of English’s most famous photos was of a mushroom cloud above the Vegas strip, which eventually became artwork on a widely circulated postcard [See Appendix Figure 5]. The foreground of the postcard depicts an array of buildings along the strip, but in the distance, a large mushroom cloud looms. The image of the postcard includes the text along the top of the card that reads, “Atomic detonation shown was 75 miles distant” [See Appendix Figure 6]. The postcard also called Las Vegas the “Up and Atom City,” a nickname playing off the excitement of waking up early to see a test.

The Atomic Bombshells

One of the most prominent components of Las Vegas tourist culture were showgirls. Jack Entratter, the general manager of the Gala Sands — one of the hotels that opened in the 1950s — said at the grand opening that he had the “most beautiful showgirls in the world,” revealing how the presence of showgirls played a central role in the construction of these hotels’ reputations. As the tests continued at the NTS, “it was not long before the mushroom cloud was vying with the showgirl for top billing along the Las Vegas strip.” In an effort to promote the tests, local businesses used the mushroom cloud image as a fashion piece for showgirls. Bonnie Gay Jolley posed for a photo wearing an “atomic bathing suit” near the Thunderbird Hotel in 1953 [See

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135 English, interview, 8.


Appendix Figure 7]. Candyce King wore another type of “atomic swimsuit” that looked like a mushroom cloud outside of the Last Frontier Hotel, also in 1953 [See Appendix Figure 8].

One showgirl named Marie Wilson posed next to a pool outside of the Flamingo Hotel in a revealing swimsuit and held a Geiger counter, the device used to measure radiation [See Appendix Figure 9]. These types of images served the core purpose of improving publicity for the city by advertising the bomb.

When one of the bombs in the test series “Operation Cue” did not detonate, the failure of the test was playfully turned into nicknames for two female performers. Marguerite Piazza and Linda Lawson wore mushroom cloud headdresses and both earned the title of “Miss-Cue.” Piazza, a visiting opera singer in Las Vegas, donned a short white dress and wore a headdress shaped like a mushroom cloud [See Appendix Figure 10] Lawson, a Copa girl, wore her headdress lying by the pool at the Sands Hotel [See Appendix Figure 11]. The description of the photo specifically reads as, “Copa Girl Linda Lawson (also known as Miss-Cue) at the Sands

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139 Don English, David Lees, photographers, Las Vegas News Bureau, “Bonnie Gay Jolley in an atomic bathing suit at the Thunderbird Hotel in Las Vegas, NV,” March 1, 1953, Las Vegas, NV.

140 Don English, photographer, Las Vegas News Bureau, “Candyce King wearing the Atomic Swimsuit poolside at the Last Frontier in Las Vegas,” March 5, 1953, Las Vegas, NV.


144 “Photograph of showgirl Linda Lawson, also known as Miss-Cue, at the Sands Pool, circa early 1950s,” Sands Hotel Collection, Special Collections, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, accessed November 10, 2016, http://d.library.unlv.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/showgirls/id/447/rec/4
Hotel wearing a mushroom cloud headpiece to promote nuclear testing in the 1950s.” Piazza and Lawson’s mushroom cloud headdresses not only made the tests entertaining, but transformed the bomb itself from being seen as weapon of mass destruction into being enjoyed as a pleasurable image. Combining showgirls with bombs compounded the already strong effect of each on the city’s tourism industry, and showed test site’s significant impact on this component of the local economy.

**The Normalization of the Bomb**

As the atomic bomb tests drew more people to Las Vegas, the act of witnessing a blast became increasingly normal within the greater context of the city. Content in *Los Angeles Times* articles shows that Las Vegas tourists and residents found no legitimate reason to be concerned about the tests, despite being less than 100 miles away from the site: “The blast, which could have originated from 40 to 100 miles away, brought no apparent fear to Las Vegas residents and visitors.” The article went on, adding that, “Hundreds of tourists in from Southern California for a weekend of never-sleep gambling also saw and felt the shock. But the shock had no visible effect on the gambling here. As one casino operator said, ‘The housemen and patrons looked up just once and then started rolling the dice again.” Reporter Cordell Hicks wrote an article that further normalized the bomb, as he opened the story by writing: “Slipping into Las Vegas between bombs, a group of Long Beach friends celebrated a birthday and two wedding

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145 “Photograph of showgirl Linda Lawson, also known as Miss-Cue, at the Sands Hotel pool, circa 1950s.”

146 “Nevada Atom Test Rocks Four States: Brilliant Flash Seen 100 Miles Away as AEC Scientists in Desert ‘Tickle Dragon’s Tail,’” *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1951, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

147 Ibid.
anniversaries at the Nevada resort!”  

As the bomb became a core component of Las Vegas tourist culture, it also became a normal part of the daily experience.

The casino patrons’ lacking reactions become even more interesting considering the fact that the blasts did often have a physical impact on the city. Despite the distance of the test site from downtown Las Vegas, the magnitude of a test would often cause aftershocks within the city. English remembered that, “We would wake up in the mornings sometimes and the water would be sloshing out of the pool, just exactly the same thing as an earthquake. Chandeliers would swing, water would slosh out of swimming pools, the elevators inside the elevator transoms would swing back and forth.”  

Harbert added that the blasts, “broke windows in Los Angeles, and it broke windows in Las Vegas.”  

E.B. Johnson, a construction worker at the NTS, said that he could feel the ground shake in Las Vegas during a test. The fact that even broken windows and shaking ground failed to elicit extreme reactions from these NTS workers demonstrates how the tests became a part of daily life in this space, and even the harm they caused went without much notice. Overall, the presence of the bomb during the atmospheric testing at the NTS led people in Las Vegas to grow accustomed to the test site and accept it within the broader context of their lives.

**Conclusion**

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148 Cordell Hicks, “Las Vegas Attracts Long Beach Group for Three Anniversary Celebrations,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1951, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

149 English, interview, 6.

150 Harbert, interview, July 15, 2005, 30

151 E. B. (Erma) Johnson, interview by Mary Palevsky, December 21, 2005, transcript, Nevada Test Site Oral History Project, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, NV.
The existence of the test site led to economic growth within the greater Las Vegas region in a variety of different ways. The test site not only introduced jobs to the region, but the workers became patrons of the city’s businesses. Newspaper journalism recognized the prominence of the atomic bomb industry during this time period, and the infiltration of the tests into Las Vegas tourist culture was transformative. Finally, the projection of the bomb onto tourist imagery created a close relationship between one of the most fundamental components of the Las Vegas economy and the bomb itself. In summary, as much as the test site became associated with American dominance and nuclear prosperity, people in the greater Las Vegas region also embraced the bomb as a symbol of economic success.
CHAPTER III
Spectacle, Privilege, and Intimacy: Reactions to the Mushroom Cloud

“I mean they were beautiful to look at but very scary to think what would happen if they ever had to use it.” – Theresa Maynard, Employee in the NTS Badge Office

Theresa Maynard and her husband George both worked at the test site. Maynard served as an assistant in the security badge office; an important position considering the integral role that security played in the test site’s operation. Maynard distributed several different types of badges to the test site employees, each corresponding to a different level of clearance. In her oral history, she discussed the beauty of the bomb in conjunction with the fear associated with using it against humans. In doing this, she distinguished the actual aesthetic of the mushroom cloud from its destructive power. Her ability to compartmentalize these two phenomena reveals the power of the actual image of the mushroom cloud in shaping people’s perceptions of the atomic bomb. To some degree, she reconciles the fear associated with the bomb with the beauty of it.

Maynard’s perception of the bomb as beautiful was partially caused by the environment she occupied alongside other NTS workers, Las Vegas residents and visiting tourists — a space characterized by its isolation in the Nevada desert. The isolated nature of the test site and Las Vegas kept these spaces separate from other large metropolitan areas, allowing the atomic bomb to develop an overwhelming presence. The image of the mushroom cloud intrigued people across the country, but this fascination was magnified in the greater Las Vegas region. The bomb’s demonstration of technological advancement and American success enthralled people, and the

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152 George and Theresa Maynard, interview, 10.

153 Ibid, 6.

spectacle of a blast left NTS workers, Las Vegas residents and tourists, and citizens of Los Angeles awestruck. The experience of seeing a mushroom cloud burst into the Nevada sky influenced the way that these people engaged with their environment. In a location geographically distant from other highly populated areas, the spectacle of the bomb pervaded people’s psyches and became one of Las Vegas’s most dominant cultural symbols.

At the test site, employees were awestruck by the weapon that they collectively worked to develop. Even though many workers frequently interacted with the bomb, the mushroom cloud itself continued to intrigue and excite them. In Las Vegas, the image of the bomb ingrained itself into the culture of the city, manifesting itself onto dress and other cultural symbols. It informed artifacts in Las Vegas ranging from high school yearbooks to drink menus. At the same time, journalistic coverage of the tests included descriptions of the bomb that used beautifying language.

A variety of reactions to the bomb emerged within the greater Las Vegas region. Tourists, Las Vegas residents and NTS employees all perceived the mushroom cloud in a diverse set of ways. On one side of the spectrum lied the emotional reactions people had to the bomb, ranging from fear to amazement. On the other side lied the embrace of the bomb as a tool used to market certain objects, as the mushroom cloud functioned as an attractive image that intrigued consumers. Through all of this, people in the greater Las Vegas area developed an intimacy with the bomb. This intimacy not only involved an embrace of the mushroom cloud, but it also created a sense of privilege and gratitude. In being in close proximity to the tests, people in the greater Las Vegas region had access to an experience afforded to few. The ability to remain safe while witnessing a test made the experience of seeing the spectacle of the atomic bomb one revolving around excitement and thrill, rather than danger or risk. Ultimately, the prosperity
associated with patriotism and economic growth extended into the more abstract experience of witnessing an atomic bomb test. Visiting tourists, Las Vegas residents, and NTS employees developed an intimacy with the atomic bomb as it became an image functioning in the consumer-driven space of Las Vegas. The privilege of seeing a test led people in the greater Las Vegas region to feel grateful for this experience, and they developed a close relationship with the bomb itself over time.

**Beauty and Emotion**

Test site workers had the most frequent exposure to the tests and were often in close proximity to ground zero. Because of their positions, many got the chance to see tests during their tenures at the site. In their oral histories, these workers described their reactions to seeing these tests in detail. Their memories of the atomic bomb involved significant levels of emotion, and their narrative experiences of seeing bomb tests exude powerful language. The test site workers’ firsthand accounts of seeing the tests reveal that their experience was an overwhelming one involving an unfamiliar, yet extremely powerful technology.

For some workers, it was the force associated with the bomb that mesmerized them. In each of these testimonies a level of awe existed indicating the power of the atomic spectacle. For Lewis Miller, a REECo communications technician, the bomb left a lasting impression. He explained, “There is so much power in one of those shots. You see that fireball and then you feel the shock wave come rolling over you. It’s a unique experience. Very unique.”  

Miller’s repetition of the word “unique” reaffirms the exceptional experience of seeing a test. Cox said that the mushroom cloud revealed a very “profound sense of what the power of a nuclear

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155 Miller, interview, 32.
explosive can do.” Cox’s use of the word “profound” not only illustrates the intensity of the tests, but it also connects to the idea that seeing the bomb enhanced her knowledge about the nature of atomic weaponry. Draper echoed a similar sentiment. “I thought it was tremendous, and I don’t think anybody who hasn’t seen one will ever realize what an atmospheric shot is. The force from bursting that atom is just almost beyond comprehension. It really is . . . Each time they were different, they looked different, they were different shots . . . I’ve got great admiration for people that are involved in that science.” Like Cox, Draper conveyed the idea that no one can understand the true nature of the atomic bomb without seeing it, like she has. By saying that it is “beyond comprehension,” she emphasized the idea that the bomb represented a fascinating novelty. Finally, her admiration for the people involved in atomic science connects to the nobility associated with that profession.

Additionally, seeing an atomic blast elicited strong emotional reactions from NTS workers because they felt lucky to see these tests. Cox said that she had “the fortune, the good fortune of seeing almost every atmospheric test . . . Yes, it was awesome.” For Cox, seeing atomic tests was a privilege, and the frequency with which she was able to witness the tests was rare among even workers at the site. In her experience, observing these tests gave her an insight into the new technology that played an integral role in her experience as a test site employee. Bostian said that the first shot that she saw with her coworkers was “a phenomenal shot to see.” The bombs tested at the NTS were not the largest — for example, hydrogen bombs of

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156 Bostian, interview, 3.
157 Draper, interview, 26.
158 Cox, interview, 8.
159 Bostian, interview, 2.
much greater magnitude were still tested in the Pacific stretching into the late-1950s— but they still involved a large fireball and black smoke emanating into the early morning sky.\textsuperscript{160} This threatening presence, however, did not seep into people like Bostian’s testimonies. Instead the bomb was phenomenal; a beautiful image that, like Cox, she felt lucky to see.

However tempting it may be to assign the one-dimensional feelings of awe and gratitude to seeing atomic tests, NTS oral histories also present a deeper level of complexity that reveal a diverse spectrum of reactions to the mushroom cloud. Harbert’s description of the test contributes to this complexity. He said: “You could use the word ‘awesome,’ you could use the word ‘scary,’ you could use the word ‘magnificent.’ Any of them would describe what happened.”\textsuperscript{161} In assigning the words ‘awesome,’ ‘scary’ and ‘magnificent’ to the bomb simultaneously, Harbert’s testimony reveals the complex emotional response that individuals had to the mushroom cloud. Claborn’s testimony also revealed a more nuanced emotional reaction to the experience of seeing a bomb test.

Oh my gosh, those things. I can remember this one particular shot. In fact, the one that was the most-scary that I can remember. I was in Indian Springs. It was about eleven o’clock and I had been working night shift, and knew they was going to set this bomb off. It was in the atmosphere, but I can’t remember if it was a tower shot or if it was a balloon shot, because a lot of times they would put them on these balloons and fill them up with helium, and you know, like. . . But the thing of it was, this was the first time that I ever heard one, and it was devastating. What it was, when I was in Indian Springs there, you could see the big flash and the mushroom.\textsuperscript{162}

Claborn experiences a sense of fear when seeing a blast, and the sound and flash of the bomb actually made him run away from it. Claborn’s testimony establishes that test site workers did

\textsuperscript{160} Weisgall, \textit{Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at Bikini Atoll}, 301

\textsuperscript{161} Harbert, interview, February 18, 2005, 19.

\textsuperscript{162} Claborn, interview, 42.
recognize that the bomb was an extremely destructive weapon, and his narrative experience reveals a clear sense of fear. Though his testimony does not demonstrate the same type of negotiation between beauty and fear as Harbert or Maynard, it’s equally important in illuminating how NTS workers responded to the bomb.

All of these testimonies show that a fear of the bomb did exist. However, they also make clear that fear was often overshadowed by either the bomb’s beauty, or an admiration for its magnificence and power. Individuals like Cox, Bostian, Harbert, Maynard and Claborn existed in a community distant from other cultural dynamics. In this space, the spectacle of the bomb provoked a spectrum of responses, ranging from amazement to fear. Many of them did recognize that the bomb was scary, but the language they used to describe the tests indicate that they also embraced it as a magnificent and awe-inspiring image deserving of attention and praise.

**Consumerism and Utility**

While workers at the NTS were in awe of the tests, visiting tourists and Las Vegas residents also enjoyed seeing the mushroom cloud. During this time period, a significant amount of Nevada’s growth depended on tourism.163 Within this framework, a large component of Las Vegas entertainment culture revolved around the idea of the spectacle.164 From showgirl performances to luxurious hotels, people came to the city wanting to be entertained by their surroundings. Therefore, the spectacle of the bomb fit neatly into this already existent – though evolving – tourist culture. The Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce sensed this, and was eager to


embrace the bomb and integrate it into the city as a “new way to make Las Vegas exotic, unique, and tantalizingly dangerous.”\textsuperscript{165}

One of the first ways that the spectacle of the bomb fit into this cultural context was through its movement into fashion and beauty. In some cases, the mushroom cloud became a form of dress, illustrating how the image of the bomb could become an attractive fashion piece. At the Sands Hotel in 1957 there was a ‘Miss Atomic Bomb’ beauty contest.\textsuperscript{166} Lee Merlin, a Copa Girl, won the contest and earned the title of “Miss Atomic Bomb” by wearing a large cotton mushroom cloud pinned to her swimsuit. In the well-known photo, her arms are thrown up into the sky, and a large smile decorates her makeup-clad features [See Appendix Figure 12].\textsuperscript{167} This image sheds light on an explicit fusion of the bomb and the showgirl, and thus, an intersection between the two of the most prominent spectacles in the region.

Another similar example of this intersection was a series of photographs that juxtaposed the image of a ballet dancer with the mushroom cloud. On April 6, 1953, English took photos of Sally McCloskey doing the ‘Atomic Ballet’ at Angel’s Peak, a location where people could see the tests [See Appendix Figures 13, 14, 15].\textsuperscript{168} These photos showed McCloskey, a slim, blonde woman wearing a black leotard, posing in acrobatic positions with the clear image of a rising mushroom cloud in the distance. A ballet performance in the foreground alongside an atomic


\textsuperscript{167} Don English, photographer, Las Vegas News Bureau, “Miss Atomic Bomb, Sands Copa Girl, Lee Merlin,” May 24, 1957, Las Vegas, NV.

\textsuperscript{168} Las Vegas News Bureau, Atomic Testing Collection, “Sally McCloskey during the Atomic Bomb test, doing the Atomic Ballet at Angel Peak – Mt. Charleston,” April 6, 1953, Las Vegas, NV.
blast in the background created an image representative of the bomb’s transformation from a weapon into a beautiful spectacle.

The atomic tests also informed cultural artifacts in the Las Vegas area because of the way that the mushroom cloud functioned as a selling point. First, the image of the bomb itself and the language associated with it was printed on food and drink labels. Robert Friedrichs, a Las Vegas resident, donated a bottle of “Iguana Radioactive Atomic Pepper Sauce” to the atomic culture exhibit at the NATM [See Appendix Figure 16]. In the same exhibit is a bottle of “Snapple Atomic Jacked Apple Energy Drink,” which was also donated by Friedrichs [See Appendix Figure 17]. Significantly, the mushroom cloud was used to market products geared toward achieving some sort of desired effect. The pepper sauce is used to achieve a spicier, or more flavorful taste and the Snapple, to quickly get a boost of energy. In Las Vegas, “atomic cocktails” also became popular at casinos. The application of the bomb to these types of foods and drinks was not coincidental. The overwhelming presence of the bomb in the greater Las Vegas region transformed it into a force that could be used to advertise items that served to achieve a thrilling effect. Considering that thrill and excitement were core components of the Las Vegas tourist experience, the intersection of the bomb with consumer goods was seamless and fit well within the rest of the city’s culture.


172 For information on how the thrill associated with going to Las Vegas led it to develop a reputation as an entertainment capital, see Denton and Morris, The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America, 1947-2000, 7; Gragg, Bright Light City: Las Vegas in Popular Culture, 120; and Pruett, “Formula for Success: How Las Vegas Became the Entertainment Capital of the World.”
An array of other objects in the Las Vegas area became inspired by the atomic bomb tests. In 1953, a Las Vegas high school yearbook had a large mushroom cloud decorate its front cover [See Appendix Figure 18]. Postage stamps from Las Vegas also displayed the image of the mushroom cloud, shown by the “atoms for peace” stamps donated by Barbara Yoerg [See Appendix Figure 19]. Further, a matchbook from the Mizpah Hotel, located 139 miles northwest of the NTS, included artwork advertising the “atomic” slot machines that were in the hotel [See Appendix Figure 20]. Through the infiltration of the mushroom cloud onto these artifacts, the spectacle of the atomic bomb and the mushroom cloud itself entered Las Vegas culture. As the test site grew the city’s economy, the bomb fascinated people and the integration of imagery illustrating this novel technology made people develop an intimacy with the bomb itself.

**Descriptions of the Bomb’s Aesthetic**

Los Angeles occupied a vastly different space than the NTS and Las Vegas, as people in the city could only see atomic tests in certain weather conditions. However, the bomb was still a remarkable sight for Los Angeles residents. Like at the test site and in Las Vegas, a spectrum of responses to the tests emerged in Los Angeles. This specifically materialized within the coverage of the bombs in the *Los Angeles Times*. One article wrote that “pictures of the terrible fireball

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and the lethally beautiful radioactive cloud have blossomed in the press.”176 The specific phrase “lethally beautiful radioactive cloud” describes a “radioactive cloud” with the word “beautiful,” which suggests a much more innocent meaning. Additionally, Gene Sherman, one of the writers assigned to covering the tests, wrote an article titled, “White Hell in the Heavens:’ Times Man with GI’s Sees Atom Explosion.” This title demonstrates a pairing of contrasting words. Describing the bomb with the terms “hell” and “heaven” explicitly demonstrates the complexity associated with the spectacle of the bomb for those more distant from the city. The pairing of words with opposite meanings displays the nuance associated with people’s reactions to the bomb in this area.

This trend continues through an extensive amount of other newspaper coverage. One article entitled “Eyewitness Atop Peak Tells of Dazzling Flash” clearly described the image of the mushroom cloud: “In the center of the horizon the cloud was still there, larger now it’s underside shot with pink from the rising sun, giving it an ominous beauty. Above the peaceful valley it floated, fluffed out into a gigantic bow by the wind.”177 The same article also used the terms “majestic,” “star-dappled,” and “rosy glow” when describing the bomb.178 The word “ominous” paired with “beauty” reveals the precarious balance between danger and magnificence. Then, the other words used illustrate a more romantic image of the bomb which framed it in a more positive and beautiful manner. Another article wrote that, “the main bomb cloud had no sinister appearance as it glistened white in the sunlight. But its ever-changing

176 Walter Millis, “Public Peek at A-Bomb Desired in Nevada Blast,” Los Angeles Times, May 2, 1952, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

177 “Eyewitness Atop Peak Tells of Dazzling Flash: Times Reporter and Photographer Watch Las Vegas Blast From Table Mountain,” Los Angeles Times, February 7, 1951, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

178 Ibid.
appearance, seen at a distance of more than 200 air miles, gave proof of its tremendous
turbulence.” Overall, this type of language in the Los Angeles Times acknowledged the
bomb’s destructive nature, but also romanticized it. The mixing of contrasting language in
describing the tests undermines the traditional view of the bomb as merely a weapon, by
employing words that offer a more romantic and lighthearted presentation of the bomb. Overall,
the primary materials from Las Vegas, Los Angeles and the NTS reveal a spectrum of reactions
to the bomb. Despite the fact that people from these areas acknowledged it as a weapon of mass
destruction, it also was linked with beauty and magnificence.

**Privilege**

Another theme that emerged was the privilege associated with seeing a bomb test. People
in Las Vegas and the surrounding area were afforded an opportunity accessible to few. In seeing
tests, they possessed a unique understanding of atomic power. Essentially, they understood the
true nature of an atomic bomb better than anyone else. Hopkins stated that the media — and
often the government as well — would misconstrue the danger of the bomb, which established a
lack of understanding among the general public:

> After the strikes on Japan, there were some wild misunderstandings about how
dangerous nuclear weapons really were out at some number of miles. And some of
this, I think, was rather encouraged, probably, by people in the media and
government officials, the feeling that if you set off a nuclear weapon, it would kill
everything within tens of hundreds of miles, which was actually incorrect.  

Hopkins position as a test site director gave him access to the ‘truth’ about the bomb, and he saw
many flaws in the ways that the bombs were discussed by people who did not have this same

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179 “Mushroom Clearly Seen at Mt. Wilson: Observers Fail to Detect Flash and Sound, but Vast Cloud
Appears Soon After Blast,” Los Angeles Times, April 23, 1952, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

180 Hopkins, interview, 7.
type of access. One Times article included a statement from AEC Chairman Gordon Dean, who said: “The people of this country have heard a great deal about atomic explosions, but a good share of what they have heard has been relayed to them by men and women who have never seen one. This is not a desirable situation.” ¹⁸¹ Hopkins and Dean both stressed that it was incredibly problematic for people to learn about the atomic bomb from folks who had never actually seen a test.

Conversely, people in the greater Las Vegas area had a special access to this understanding. Essentially, being able to safely see a bomb test convinced them that the bomb was not scary, should not be feared, and was simply a tool for safety and good. Bostian recalled how grateful she was that her family woke her up to see bomb tests when she grew up in Las Vegas: “It was something that I look back now and I’m so glad that my parents made us get up and watch. Some of my friends’ parents would pile them in the car and drive up to somewhere up closer to the test site. I think one of my friends said they would go up and park at Angel’s Peak or something so they could really see.” ¹⁸² In retrospect, Bostian is thankful that she had the opportunity, along with her family, to watch the bomb tests. Williams explained that he felt lucky to keep working at the NTS because it meant that he could see more tests: “It’s a spectacular scene. If there’s such a thing as a good scene within the nuclear testing business, I want to say ‘spectacular.’ It’s very unique. It’s something you probably won’t get to see only a few times in your lifetime as a participant. If you leave the program, why, you won’t never see another one probably. I was fortunate to be able to remain in the program.” ¹⁸³ Essentially, if

¹⁸¹ Walter Millis, “Public Peek at A-Bomb Desired in Nevada Blast,” Los Angeles Times, May 2, 1952, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁸² Bostian, interview, 5.

¹⁸³ Williams, interview, 31-32.
Williams had to identify one positive component of nuclear weapons, it was seeing the testing itself.

One of the accounts that most clearly demonstrates the privilege associated with seeing a test was Sherman’s “White Hell in Heavens” article in the *Los Angeles Times*. In March 1953, he was actually present for one of the bomb tests with other reporters and soldiers. The 1000 troops and 20 “newsmen” watching the test “were closer to atomic detonation than any human being in history except the Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” While Sherman awaited the blast, the soldier beside him expressed his desire to see the bomb: “One of the men said he wanted to see it because it had been written up so much and he wanted to be in on the know. He claimed to have postponed his separation from the Army just so he could be with us this morning. ‘I just got to see it,’ he grinned broadly. There was nothing apprehensive about him.” This quote demonstrates that the reason why this soldier was so excited to see a test is because he wanted to gain a knowledge of the bomb that was inaccessible without seeing an actual mushroom cloud.

In the story, Sherman also wrote the exact words that the captain of the military operation said immediately before the test: “From the loud-speakers came Capt. Harold Kinne’s level voice in comments: ‘You gentlemen are privileged to be closer than any of our troops have ever been — closer than any American troops in history. This is the first time you may get hurt if you don’t obey orders. Two miles is mighty close. Gentlemen, this is the greatest show on earth. Relax and enjoy it.’” Kinne’s explicit usage of the word ‘privileged’ when speaking to the men awaiting

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184 Gene Sherman, “‘White Hell in the Heavens:’ Times Man With GI’s Sees Atom Explosion,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1953, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

185 Ibid.

186 Ibid.
the blast demonstrates the way in which seeing the detonation of an atomic bomb was not associated with fear as much as it was associated with excitement and gratitude.

**The Absence of Fear**

Seeing a bomb test not only gave Sherman and his companions the space to feel grateful for their experience, but it also alleviated their fear by allowing them to watch a test safely. In his account, he included observations of his fellow viewers’ impressions of the blast. Sherman wrote, “Once out of the trenches, the GIs resumed their gripes and laughter. They volunteered little of their impressions . . . But none seemed overly concerned . . . ‘Well, it looks like nobody is scared of the thing, anyway,’ mused Gurr.”187 Sherman went on to explain that even though it would take scientists time to evaluate the effects of the atomic explosion, “it is not too soon to evaluate the effect of the explosion on American troops subjected to it at an unprecedented distance. This can be done quite succinctly. They just aren’t afraid of the A-bomb period.”188

One of Sherman’s clearest takeaways in the article was that the people he witnessed the test were simply not afraid of the atomic bomb, despite being almost as close to ground zero as some of the Japanese living in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Many of the people located in Las Vegas – regardless of whether or not they worked at the test site – felt that the bombs were not scary at all. Being in close proximity to the tests drove Las Vegas residents to partake in a plethora of civil defense drills during this time, which eased their anxieties about what procedures to take in the case of nuclear attack.189 English found it comical that Life Magazine portrayed Las Vegas as a dangerous place: “They said, *There’s*
danger everywhere you look in Las Vegas. That’s the way they captioned it [laughing].”\textsuperscript{190} The Las Vegas area was technically at risk because of the threat of radioactive fallout, but English demonstrated little concern about safety. In reality, his testimony reflects a perception that being in danger because of close proximity to the test site was laughable. As Denton and Morris write, “Characteristically, its [Las Vegas’] residents seemed less worried about the effects of radiation on themselves than about the fallout for business: They feared that tourists would stay away or even that the explosions would bounce the dice and roulette balls off the tables.”\textsuperscript{191} The spectacle of the atomic bomb was exciting, and being close to the tests did not inspire fear, but instead intrigued and fascinated Las Vegas residents and visitors alike.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Overall, a multi-dimensional reaction to the bomb tests emerges through oral histories, cultural artifacts from Las Vegas, and \textit{Los Angeles Times} articles. The lack of comprehensive knowledge about radiation allowed the AEC to easily dismiss it, leading people to trust the government. Without an active concern about radiation, the spectacle of the bomb became a positive and exciting image. Being in close proximity to the test site meant that people in the greater Las Vegas region could witness atomic tests and gain an intimacy with the spectacle of the bomb. Many people felt emotional when seeing tests, and often identified the bomb as something beautiful. The spectacle of the bomb became an intriguing image that functioned as a tool to advertise certain goods. Descriptions of the atomic bomb in \textit{Los Angeles Times} articles present it as not an image solely associated with danger or destruction, but also beauty.

\textsuperscript{190} English, interview, 7.

advancement, and prosperity. Finally, being able to physically see a mushroom cloud not only made people feel incredibly privileged, but it in fact alleviated their fear because they could see a test without being harmed.
CONCLUSION
The Legacy of the Atmospheric Bomb Tests

As Denton and Morris write in the beginning of their book, “For all its apparent uniqueness, all the hype, the garish town in the southern Nevada desert has always been more representative of America than either wants to admit.” This thesis acknowledges that the “garish town” of Las Vegas not only represents America, but it complicates its history during the treacherous Cold War years. In the United States’ effort to maintain its military dominance on the world stage in the second half of the 20th century, it established an atomic testing site that transformed the greater Las Vegas region. Most Americans’ understanding of the atomic bomb was limited to its role in ending World War II. But, for Nevada Test Site workers, residents and tourists in Las Vegas, and the city of Los Angeles, the atmospheric atomic bomb tests were a monthly occurrence visible from distant rooftops and city streets. In the 1950s, the image of the mushroom cloud captivated these people’s imaginations and integrated itself into their culture. They interpreted it as a symbol of prosperity, and this embrace of the bomb overpowered most fear or concern within these converging spaces. The patriotic sentiment attached to the bomb, economic growth caused by the test site, and fascination with atomic weapons as intriguing and powerful new technologies cultivated an environment in the greater Las Vegas region built around the interpretation of the bomb as a positive entity deserving of fascination and praise.

While it’s crucial to recognize the clear themes that unified the region, this thesis would be incomplete without discussing how these tests provoked a wide spectrum of emotional responses. However, the primary source materials that this thesis engages with from the NTS, Las Vegas and Los Angeles demonstrate that the positive associations with the bomb dominated

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the collective consciousness of the space. There was an unease associated with using bombs against civilian populations, but there was still an importance assigned to maintaining American nuclear dominance on the world stage. The proximity of Las Vegas to the test site did place it in a precarious position because of radioactive fallout, but when fear of radiation did not negatively affect tourism – and in fact, the bomb tests increased tourist activity – the tests became emblematic of economic success and overall growth. The spectacle of the bomb overwhelmed people — and in some cases frightened them — but even when the mushroom cloud was acknowledged as a destructive weapon, it was simultaneously romanticized.

For 12 years, the bomb dominated this space and created massive cultural, political and economic transformations within the region. However, by the early-1960s, this all changed. In 1963, the United States, Soviet Union and Great Britain signed a test ban treaty that “[pledged] solemnly to end nuclear explosions in the atmosphere, outer space, and underwater.”193 All of the testing at the NTS moved underground, so seeing mushroom clouds light up the early morning Nevada sky was no longer possible. Titus writes that, “In 1963, when testing moved underground, most soon forgot about the NTS altogether.”194 The blasts no longer reached Los Angeles, and test site workers lost the opportunity to see the tests – an experience each of them deeply valued. The government used the Nevada Test Site for weapons development until 1992, but the widespread cultural impact of and fascination with the atmospheric tests almost entirely disappeared after 1963.

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Thus, this 12-year time period marks a brief moment within the greater conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, it is a moment that seriously challenges traditional understandings of Cold War history. Considering the nuclear anxiety that paralyzed American culture during this time period, shouldn’t the people closest to the atomic testing have experienced this fear on an enhanced level rather than embraced the test site with open arms? More than anyone else, wouldn’t they be the ones most anxious about seeing tests, rather than the ones feeling the most privileged? At its core, the test site, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles serve as a microcosm of Cold War culture worthy of scholarly exploration because it challenges preconceived notions about the nature of American responses to the atomic bomb. Overall, this investigation of the bomb tests’ micro-level influence on the greater Las Vegas region is integral to understanding American culture during the Cold War period. This space was incredibly unique, and understanding the cultural ramifications of being in close proximity to what would eventually amount to over 100 atmospheric bomb tests enhances understanding of how the arms race shaped American culture.

Paying close attention to a particular moment in history is valuable, for it illuminates scholarly understanding of the significance attached to events that may seem unimportant upon first glance. With that said, a limitation of this thesis is that it isolates its focus to this 12-year period without considering the contemporary implications of the test site. Thus, a component of my research that further scholarship could expand upon is a potential connection between the events of 1951-1963 and Las Vegas in the 21st century. 1950s Las Vegas revolved around tourism and thrill, which strikes a noticeable parallel to the excitement and risk associated with Las Vegas today. In 2012, the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce honored the 55th anniversary of “Miss Atomic Bomb” with Holly Madison recreating the photo. Like Merlin, she wore a fluffy
mushroom cloud and threw her hands up into the sky [See Appendix Figure 21].

Honoring the intersection of the showgirl image with the mushroom cloud over 50 years after the atomic testing demonstrates that the city still possesses a nostalgia for the 1950s, and additional research on this phenomenon would be illuminating.

According to Denton and Morris, people who venture to Las Vegas “come in search of what they and their world might be.” For 12 years, this world was one dominated by atomic bombs lighting up the early morning skies. It revolved around showgirls modeling mushroom cloud swimsuits, test site workers driving hundreds of miles into the arid Nevada desert, and journalists huddling in trenches waiting eagerly for the detonation of a bomb. It was a world that did not exist for long, but in its brief lifetime, it added a layer of complexity and nuance to this city of sins. For a place that recreates and displays tourist attractions from cities across the world along its strip, Las Vegas’s relationship with the atomic bomb is entirely personal; it cannot be taken, nor adapted into a different iteration. The atmospheric atomic testing of the 1950s is unique to the greater Las Vegas region, and just as the radioactive particles emitted from the test still linger in the desert, the legacy of the test site will endure.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Las Vegas News Bureau. “Atomic soldiers arriving Royal Nevada.” April 18, 1954. Las Vegas, NV.

Figure 3: Don English, photographer. Las Vegas News Bureau, Atomic Testing Collection. “Atomic bomb flash as seen on Fremont Street.” January 1, 1955. Las Vegas, NV.

Figure 4: Don English, photographer. Las Vegas News Bureau, Atomic Testing Collection. “Atomic mushroom cloud over the Old Frontier Village in Las Vegas with spectators in swimming pool.” May 7, 1953. Las Vegas, NV.
Figure 5: Las Vegas News Bureau. “Atomic Bomb Test from Fremont Street – Circa 1955.” January 1, 1955. Las Vegas, NV.

**Figure 7:** Don English, David Lees, photographers. Las Vegas News Bureau. “Bonnie Gay Jolley in an atomic bathing suit at the Thunderbird Hotel in Las Vegas, NV.” March 1, 1953. Las Vegas, NV.

![Image of Bonnie Gay Jolley in an atomic bathing suit at the Thunderbird Hotel in Las Vegas, NV.]

**Figure 8:** Don English, photographer. Las Vegas News Bureau. “Candyce King wearing the Atomic Swimsuit poolside at the Last Frontier in Las Vegas.” March 5, 1953. Las Vegas, NV.

![Image of Candyce King wearing the Atomic Swimsuit poolside at the Last Frontier in Las Vegas.]


**Figure 13:** Las Vegas News Bureau, Atomic Testing Collection. “Sally McCloskey during the Atomic Bomb test, doing the Atomic Ballet at Angel Peak – Mt. Charleston.” April 6, 1953. Las Vegas, NV.

**Figure 14:** Las Vegas News Bureau, Atomic Testing Collection. “Sally McCloskey during the Atomic Bomb test, doing the Atomic Ballet at Angel Peak – Mt. Charleston.” April 6, 1953. Las Vegas, NV.
Figure 15: Las Vegas News Bureau, Atomic Testing Collection. “Sally McCloskey during the Atomic Bomb test, doing the Atomic Ballet at Angel Peak – Mt. Charleston.” April 6, 1953. Las Vegas, NV.

