Session 1 - Cold War technoscience in Nevada: The Nevada test site oral history project

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Abstract

During the Cold War, the United States conducted over 1000 nuclear weapons tests. Of those, 928 took place at the Nevada Test Site (NTS). One hundred tests were in the atmosphere and 921 underground at the 1375 square mile site located 65 miles north of Las Vegas. Nevada Test Site Oral History Project (NTSOHP) researchers have conducted over 300 hours of interviews with individuals affiliated with and impacted by the NTS, documenting the diversity of experience among many communities of voices including: weapons scientists, test site officials, laborers, contractors and support personnel, the military, American Indians, communities downwind of the NTS, anti-nuclear activists. The interviews record the often conflicting calculations of the risk and benefits of nuclear testing, providing a unique window into the reasoning and decision-making strategies utilized by individuals at all levels of the U.S. Cold War nuclear testing program complex, 1951-1992.

1. Introduction

The discovery of nuclear fission and creation of the first atomic bomb fundamentally changed the ways in which statesmen and military leaders calculate the risks of war. Beginning in the early 1940s, American elites, including Manhattan Project scientists, have grappled with the meanings of the creation of the first atomic bomb for science and society. The Trinity test and the atomic bombings of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of W.W. II remain subjects of historical controversy and policy debates. For some, the bombings swiftly concluded what could have been a protracted battle to end the Pacific war, including the invasion of the Japanese homeland. For others, they were an immoral use of barbaric weaponry that should be outlawed for its necessarily indiscriminate killing of noncombatants. Before the war’s end, scientists and statesmen privy to the work of the Manhattan Project expressed grave concerns about the wider implications of the discovery of fission, the creation of an atomic weapon and the possible invention of a “super bomb” or fusion weapon. Their questions embodied early calculations of the risks and benefits of nuclear weapons, ranging from the fearful: would an atomic explosion ignite a thermonuclear reaction in the atmosphere?, to the hopeful: could the bomb, after its devastation had been demonstrated, be, in the words of Niels Bohr, “big enough” to bring an end to the institution of war as men had historically waged it? Oral history has been a powerful tool for documenting the first-person witness of nuclear weapons’ entry into history. It remains a vital method for exploring the postwar impacts of nuclear weapons throughout America’s Cold War nuclear weapons complex, including the Nevada Test Site. The remembered past of the NTS Oral History Project participants documents the ways that not only scientists and statesmen, but individuals at all levels of society struggled with nuclear danger, technoscientific complexity and the meaning of nuclear reality in American democracy.

2. Research overview

The NTSOHP follows the Oral History Association Evaluation Guidelines and underwent review by UNLV’s Institutional Review Board. All interviews are recorded on digital audio with selected digital video. Interviews are fully transcribed, time-marked, annotated and indexed. Research participants include a broad universe of individuals affiliated with and impacted by nuclear testing in Nevada during its forty year history, exploring subjects from the history of nuclear science, to the organizational history of the NTS, to the downwind effects of testing in Nevada and neighboring states. Interview transcripts and related photographs and documents are being housed in and will be accessible digitally through UNLV’s Lied Library.

3. Student participation

The NTSOHP is a student-centered project. More than 40 UNLV graduate students have participated in the NTSOHP as research assistants and interns and through public history classes. Students receive training in oral history methods. They conduct extensive background research in the subjects of their interviews. They also learn the nuts and bolts of managing a large-scale oral
history project and the thousands of pages of data and related documents and photographs such research generates. An important aspect of the project and student training is working in relationship with the various groups affiliated with the project’s broad research base within Nevada. Student research interests include: NTS participants in 1988 joint U.S./U.S.S.R. “Joint Verification Experiment,” needed for the negotiation of international treaties; the faith-based anti-nuclear protest movement; women and the NTS; the environmental impacts of the nuclear testing; Indian communities and nuclear testing; compensation programs for downwind populations, atomic veterans and former NTS workers.

4. Technology, secrecy and controversy

Oral histories that document the history of specialized technical fields such as science, engineering and invention face special challenges. Some subjects may be off-limits due to classification or trade-secret constraints. These fields may also be the subject of historical or current controversy and contested memory.

4.1. Documenting technological fields

Oral historians are often required to conduct interviews across a wide-spectrum of subjects. Those working in the history of technical fields face particular challenges if they do not possess adequate specialized knowledge—they may be unaware of relevant questions to ask about particular scientific or technical matters. On the other hand, interviewers who possess technical understanding, such as colleagues of the interviewees, also face challenges. In such cases, tacit understandings between interviewer and interviewee can result in problematic transcripts that are missing important details due to the “short-hand” and implicit, shared knowledge that was not clearly articulated during the interview. Some large institutional archives employ two interviewers for interviews with scientists, one trained in oral history methods and the other a subject-area specialist.

The NTSOHP does not have the resources necessary to employ two interviewers per interviewer. However, the lack of technical expertise does not in and of itself invalidate non-specialists as interviewers. In some cases, it increases the value of the interview because non-expert researchers can “stand in” for the non-expert reader, encouraging interviewees to explain, teach and “translate” technical terms. This process also provides an opportunity for interviewees to think in new ways about their work as they are asked unexpected questions during the interview.

NTSOHP interviewers, including students, conduct background research on the subjects at hand. The task for all such researchers is to have the courage to tell interviewees when they do not understand, and to facilitate narrative that describes in as much detail as possible the technical matters under discussion.

4.2. Oral histories and classified material

Oral history research ethics protect all interviewees from feeling obligated or being coerced into discussing subjects they do not wish discuss during the interview. Oral historians have a special obligation to interviewees who hold or have held government clearances and are concerned about revealing classified information during an interview. The NTSOHP informed consent document outlines the right of project participants to decline to answer any question as well as to stop the interview at any point. Furthermore, project participants are encouraged to directly inform researchers when they think that answering a particular question will violate secrecy obligations. In a small number of cases, interviewees have asked that their transcripts be reviewed by government classification officers. Interviewees generally understand the importance a historical record as free as possible from known cover stories.

4.3. Documenting controversy

How can researchers document the fractured worlds of meaning created by the bomb’s emergence as a leading character in human history? Oral history is well suited to recording the often contradictory, conflicting narratives of nuclear weapons testing. Central to the NTSOHP is the tension among the contested memories of project participants. Rather than trying to settle them, the challenge is to explore, through dialogue with a host of project participants, the individual, social and cultural meaning-making that took place during the Cold War and is extant in our culture and consciousness. One strength of oral history as a method is that it can be democratic and pluralistic. The researchers’ task is not to develop a single overarching, master narrative. Rather, the work thrives on the intersections of a multiplicity of experiences, reasoning and choices. It allows researchers to explore, document and ponder the particulars of the divergent stories of the lived experience of Cold War nuclear testing in America.

5. Acknowledgements

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