

Nuclear Families: (Re)producing 1950s Suburban America in the Marshall Islands

It was July 1962 and on Kwajalein Island in the Central Pacific, American engineers were busy analyzing their first successful missile interception. The missile had been launched from five thousand miles away at California's Vandenberg Air Force Base. The interception would be followed by successful ballistic missile launches from Vandenberg toward Kwajalein's lagoon, the "catcher's mitt" of the Pacific and a key Cold War missile range (Figure 1). For decades, American scientists and engineers analyzed missiles splashing down in Kwajalein's lagoon, as their children splashed down in the island's family swimming pool, one of many suburban luxuries located within a fifteen-minute bike ride from where these scientists and engineers worked to advance America's growing Cold War arsenal. On Kwajalein, these vessels for carrying nuclear weapons lived side by side with America's nuclear families.

Kwajalein is the largest island in the world's largest coral atoll (Kwajalein Atoll), part of the western chain of the Marshall Islands, located approximately 2,100 miles southwest of Hawaii. During the 1960s, the army transformed this Marshallese island into small-town suburban America. Army officials designed Kwajalein as a space that captured one paradoxical narrative of 1950s Cold War America: anxiety over nuclear insecurity eased by the illusion of greater nuclear-family security through the suburban refuge. Signaling the



Figure 1. Located some 2,100 miles southwest of Hawaii, Kwajalein Island is the largest landmass in the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. Taking control of Japanese Micronesian colonies under a UN Trust agreement, the U.S. Navy conducted sixty-seven atmospheric nuclear tests in the northern Marshall Islands using Kwajalein as a support base from 1946 to 1958. Starting in 1961, the U.S. Army began to test intercontinental ballistic missiles, which were fired at Kwajalein's lagoon from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. The prohibition of Marshallese living on Kwajalein Island starting in 1951 laid the foundations for a segregated suburban existence for military-contract employees and their families. Ebeye, the island to which Marshallese were displaced at this time, is the rectangular-shaped island shown just beyond the northern tip of Kwajalein. (Courtesy of Sue Rosoff; photograph by Sue Rosoff)

army's long-term success in molding Kwajalein into an American domestic space, one American resident recently described Kwajalein as "hyper America . . . more American than America" (1).

For the past fifty years, this suburban setting layered atop the coral foundations of Kwajalein Island has been home to army personnel and American civilian contractors. Scientists and engineers recruited to operate the army's ballistic missile program have come to Kwajalein with their families to live and work, with approximately 20 military personnel and 1,500 to 5,000 civilian contractors residing on Kwajalein in any given year. Americans moving to Kwajalein settled on an island cleared of indigenous inhabitants by the U.S. military. They came to a place in the middle of the Pacific described as a safe, secure, and segregated American suburb.

How did a site of colonial displacement, segregation, and Cold War weapons testing come to be understood as a wholesome refuge of small-town America? The army designed Kwajalein as a 1950s suburban outpost amid a Cold War context of unprecedented U.S. military expansion. To help lure America's top scientists and engineers and their families to the Marshall Islands, the army transformed much of the island into a space of suburban domesticity. Like iconic Levittown, New York,

and the emerging American suburban landscape modeled in its likeness, Kwajalein was constructed as a domestic refuge from external

threats—a setting whose row housing, family amenities, and lush landscaping provided a portrait of containment from Soviet penetration and intrusion by a nearby racialized urban other.

In her groundbreaking book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988), historian Elaine Tyler May reveals how the suburban home came to embody a sense of security as a domestic refuge amid threats of Cold War nuclear insecurity and fears about racial integration. Kwajalein's contained suburban missile range isolated in the middle of the Pacific brought these realities into closer proximity than in most Cold War landscapes. Teaching Kwajalein's story affords an opportunity to highlight the interplay between U.S. domestic and imperial culture during the Cold War. Analyzing Kwajalein's history allows students to consider how this portrait of 1950s suburbia was among the many domestic cultural exports of an expanding U.S. empire during the Cold War. This history also helps us investigate U.S. urban and suburban history from a new angle, pushing us to understand 1950s suburbia beyond the iconic Levittown by considering this Pacific island.

The U.S. Military Imperial Industrial Complex

In his 1961 farewell speech, U.S. president Dwight D. Eisenhower warned Americans of the potential consequences that would result from the disproportionate influence of the "military-industrial complex" on American society. He did not, however, identify the simultaneous consequences awaiting colonial subjects around the world, whose homes would become the testing grounds for such military-industrial growth. The Marshallese became intimately aware of such consequences in 1946 when the United States began testing nuclear weapons on their islands.

The U.S. military transformed Kwajalein into a suburban missile range amid broader imperial expansion throughout Micronesia in the aftermath of World War II. Under the 1947 United Nations Trusteeship Agreement, the United States gained formal strategic control over Japan's former Micronesian colonies and was charged with a contradictory mission of supporting the region's inhabitants toward self-determination, while simultaneously using the islands for defense. The agreement, which never solicited input from Micronesians, supported a U.S. quest to use whatever means necessary—including any land desired—within the Trust Territory to carry out an indeterminate mission to promote national security and global peace. As a new American colony, the Marshall Islands became the primary location where the United States would test increasingly destructive nuclear weapons and delivery systems. By sanctioning U.S. imperial control over Micronesian lands to support U.S. defense, the United Nation (UN) Trusteeship Agreement hastened the rise of a U.S. military *imperial* industrial complex during the Cold War (2).

Prior to its transformation into a suburban missile range, Kwajalein served as the support site for U.S. nuclear testing in the northern Marshall Islands from 1946 to 1958. Not until the American colonial era did Marshallese experienced such destruction and contamination of their islands, but they had a long history of colonialism having come under German control during the late nineteenth century and under Japanese rule during World War I. After the United States gained control of the Marshall Islands and the rest of Japan's colonies in Micronesia during World War II, naval officials characterized the area as "sparsely populated," identifying Marshallese homes as prime real estate for weapons testing. At the time, hundreds of Marshallese resided in these "sparsely populated" islands in the northern region, living through sustainable agriculture and fishing. In 1946, drawing upon the deep roots of American missionary influence in the Marshall Islands that began in the 1850s and led to the great majority of Marshallese converting to Christianity, the navy told the Marshallese

that evacuating their homes on Bikini Island to allow U.S. nuclear testing was "for the good of mankind and to end all wars" (3). Thereafter, the northern Marshall Islands came to constitute the space where the United States most overtly flexed its nuclear muscles before the Soviet Union and the world. During the twelve-year nuclear-testing campaign, the United States carried out sixty-seven atmospheric nuclear tests, which included the 1954 hydrogen bomb, equivalent in power to one thousand Hiroshima bombs (4). Within a year of the nuclear testing campaign's conclusion, the United States designated Kwajalein as the location for testing the vehicles that could deliver these nuclear warheads: intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Foundational to Kwajalein's transformation into a segregated suburban missile installation during the 1960s was the navy's removal of all Micronesian laborers from the island in 1951. Marshallese had worked with other Micronesians on Kwajalein since World War II when the navy captured the island from the Japanese. Following the 1944 Kwajalein battle, Micronesian laborers helped the navy clear debris from the island and construct the U.S. naval station. In 1949 the navy declared that suitable living space could no longer be provided on the island for native employees and identified Ebeye Island, three miles away, as the best alternative location for these 450 laborers (5). By 1951 Kwajalein had become a space of exclusive American residency. Marshallese senator Tony de Brum recalled being on Kwajalein for a visit with his grandfather at the time the Marshallese laborers were removed: "They didn't explain. They didn't have to and they didn't try to" (6).

In the years that followed, Ebeye became a racialized urban island housing a Marshallese labor force that commuted daily by ferry to serve American families living on segregated suburban Kwajalein. By the 1960s, Kwajalein's suburban domesticity contrasted with Ebeye's urban character as a home to "foreign" labor. Kwajalein and Ebeye's relationship paralleled the spatial dynamics shared by urban and suburban spaces in the United States during the Cold War. This period witnessed the transformation of urban spaces into increasingly isolated and racially segregated communities from which suburbia provided a protective domestic refuge (7).

Kwajalein and 1950s American Domesticity

As scholars of suburbia have revealed, Levittown's portrait of the American dream through affordable homeownership in racially homogeneous communities entailed enforcement of restrictive racial covenants. During the late 1940s, developer William Levitt used these covenants to prohibit nonwhites from purchasing homes in Levittown, but his actions constituted just one piece in a wider web of policies and behaviors perpetuating suburban racial segregation during the 1950s and after. In the postwar decades, banks denied housing loans and real estate agents refused to show properties to African Americans seeking to move into white neighborhoods, while the federal government limited blacks' mortgage subsidies to segregated neighborhoods. Private and public policies acted alongside white violence aimed at protecting neighborhoods from "intrusion" by racialized others to shape suburban expansion into a structure reinforcing racial hierarchies in postwar American society.

Kwajalein's suburban transformation had much in common with, but also differed from, this continental portrait of racial segregation. Unlike in Levittown, Americans living on Kwajalein resided in a racially diverse setting that, while still inhabited by a majority of white residents, also had a sizeable number of nonwhite American residents. Particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, the army recruited many native Hawaiian and Japanese American contractors from Hawaii to perform construction work on the island. Racial hierarchies were less pronounced among Americans on Kwajalein but were starkly visible through the segregation of American residents and Marshallese

workers. The military excluded Marshallese from living on Kwajalein and over time enacted restrictions increasingly limiting Marshallese access to island stores and services.

Unlike the middle-class commuter culture that defined American suburbia, Kwajalein's commuters comprised the racialized Marshallese labor force. These commuters relied on ferry service to bridge the distance between Kwajalein's segregated residency and Marshallese dwellings on urban Ebeye. Just three miles away, Ebeye Island housed Marshallese and other Micronesians whom the navy began displacing from Kwajalein in 1951. After Kwajalein was transferred from navy to army jurisdiction in 1964, officials continued to resettle to Ebeye those Marshallese families living in the military's expanding missile impact zone. Since that time, the army has attempted to control the movement of Ebeye's Marshallese labor force on Kwajalein. Suburbanization made this control easier while simultaneously erasing Marshallese history from the island, ironically suggesting those indigenous to the region were the foreigners.

Army officials knew they would have to create a domestic refuge on Kwajalein—an environment safe and supportive for American families—if they were to attract the nation's top scientists and engineers. The military thus planned a suburban community in the 1960s that has retained elements of a 1950s Levittown ever since. Army investment in suburban luxuries on Kwajalein aimed to address recruitment challenges of asking scientists and engineers to move their families halfway across the globe to a foreign location. They did this by bringing key aspects of American suburban life to Kwajalein. The military offered an array of financial and quality-of-life incentives to incoming employees, creating a largely subsidized suburban lifestyle on the island.

The island's department and grocery stores were among the many modern consumer conveniences that army and civilian contractor manuals showcased to incoming residents. Welcome manuals included photographs of island homes' modern kitchens and living rooms that mirrored the imagery captured in Richard M. Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev's 1959 "kitchen debates" (Figure 2). Manuals also highlighted Kwajalein's community library stocked with over ten thousand books, an island nursery school, and the George Seitz K-12 school, all aimed at supporting family life. Kwajalein's welcome guides even boasted of dining halls and social clubs that hosted special theme nights where personnel could dine on "hometown" favorites such as prime rib (8). The army geared these comforts and conveniences toward creating a sense of home away from home for the nation's top scientists and engineers and their families.

Oral histories with former American residents, annual reunions, and online communities reveal a deep nostalgia for Kwajalein that remains rooted in a perception of the island as both a place *and* a time. Many Americans warmly remember Kwajalein through its 1950s small-town feel, a tropical "*Leave It to Beaver*" setting where everyone knew one another. Former American resident Eugene Sims described a "Kwaj condition" in his 1993 memoir, a condition born in part from the exceptional sense of community experienced by those living on this isolated utopian island in the middle of the Pacific and the sense of disorientation afflicting them upon departure (9). In a recent interview, long-time American resident Nate Jackson fondly recalled his years working as a photographer on the island, taking pictures of children for the yearbook. He said he considered all the "Kwaj kids" his own children (10). Over the years, Kwajalein came to embody both the familiar and familial characteristics of an American suburb to its island residents.

Kwajalein's transformation into a space housing radars and satellites alongside suburban residential and recreational amenities occurred in stages over time, with the most expansive building boom beginning in 1959 when the military designated the island as a key

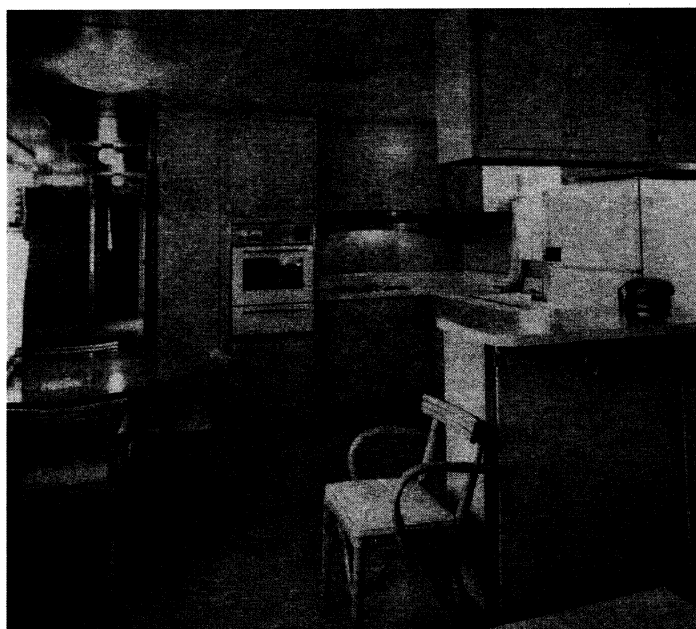


Figure 2. In an effort to encourage its employees to take an assignment working on Kwajalein Island, government contractor Bell Telephone Laboratories advertised the available suburban amenities, which included fully stocked department and grocery stores, swimming pools, and modern kitchens. This 1961 photo showcases the details: electric ovens, stoves, refrigerators, and, most likely, Bell telephones. (Courtesy of Hamilton Library, University of Hawai'i, Manoa)

missile installation. By the mid-1960s, after construction expanded the island's hospital, high school, and elementary school buildings, one military official reflected on the island's miraculous transformation noting that, "from the scarred battleground of 1944, Kwajalein [became] a clean, modern, attractive, self-contained community closely resembling most small modern American cities" (11).

Civilian contractors arriving with their families encountered a landscape intimately capturing the dualities of Cold War security and insecurity in American life. Kwajalein's missile facilities dotted the island with a futuristic landscape of advanced weaponry designed to achieve national and global security. Likewise, Kwajalein's suburban structures marked the island with an atmosphere of security rooted in American domesticity. As missiles aimed to protect the nation state from Soviet aggression, suburbia aimed to protect American families from foreign threats. Palm tree-lined row housing helped create the illusion of insulated families living within a secure space of domesticity, distancing them from all that remained unsafe.

Marking Foreign and Domestic Threats

As many Americans enjoyed a path of upward mobility that their subsidized lifestyle on Kwajalein afforded, their privileged status was further highlighted by another island luxury: Marshallese domestic servants. Normalizing entitlement to Kwajalein was achieved, in part, by removing anyone deemed foreign to the space. Yet American domesticity required domestic labor. Therefore, military planners created a highly structured set of rules enabling Marshallese domestics and other laborers to work on Kwajalein, but only under strict surveillance (Figure 3). Military rules disciplining Marshallese labor on Kwajalein marked those indigenous to the region as foreign to what was now identified as an American space.

Following their displacement by the navy in 1951, Marshallese workers could not live on Kwajalein and remained subject to curfews for leaving the island each day (12). Civilian contractor manuals



Figure 3. Underlying the seemingly ideal suburban existence for the middle-class American contractors and their families was a Marshallese work force that worked the lowest-paying jobs on Kwajalein—including as domestic servants—but were not allowed to live on the island as of 1951. They returned to nearby Ebeye Island by ferry each night, under the watchful eye of police. More modern surveillance systems have become common both in U.S. military outposts abroad and in increasingly numerous gated communities around the United States. (Courtesy of Hamilton Library, University of Hawai'i, Manoa)

introduced Americans to the Marshallese by associating the former residents with segregation and servitude. This introduction contributed to an expected hierarchical relationship between Americans and Marshallese workers based on American control over Marshallese land and entitlement to Marshallese labor. A 1961 Bell Laboratories guide for incoming Kwajalein employees detailed the availability and cost for Marshallese domestic help (\$1.50 to \$1.80 per day, depending on family size), noting, "They are transported to Kwajalein in the morning and returned to *their* island (Ebeye) at the end of the day." The Bell guide regretted that there were not enough women to provide a "domestic servant" for each and every family (13).

A few years later, the Transport Company of Texas welcome guide emphasized rules against Marshallese domestics residing on Kwajalein past work hours. The guide noted that the women needed to return to Ebeye by 4:45 p.m. daily, adding, "None are allowed to remain overnight or into the evening" (14). Company officials also reassured Americans that they had already considered the risks of bringing Marshallese servants into their homes. The guide explained that "maids are also given physical examinations at the hospital before being employed" (15). These physical examinations signified a common colonial predicament centered on the desire to employ colonial subjects in the most intimate settler spaces while also addressing fears of potential diseases contaminating this realm of intimacy (16).

In addition to enumerating rules governing Marshallese labor on Kwajalein, some welcome guides also included descriptions of Micronesian racial features. In a section entitled "Basic Micronesian Racial Stock," the 1961 Bell guide contextualized Marshallese racial characteristics by following an anthropological tradition of using "species language" to describe indigenous peoples (17). Attempting to account for variations in physical appearance among Pacific Islanders, the manual described "the full-blooded Micronesian islanders . . . [as having] complicated *breed* lines" (18). Situating such descriptions alongside

regulations on Marshallese labor, the manual positioned these workers as a racially foreign presence on Kwajalein; the Marshallese were commuters who entered America each morning and returned to Micronesia at the end of the day. Kwajalein provided an eerie parallel to suburbia on the U.S. mainland, which became defined through distance and containment from a racialized urban other.

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the stark segregation emerging between an increasingly impoverished urban Ebeye and Kwajalein's suburban utopia was condemned as American apartheid by American and international journalists as well as by Marshallese political leaders. Marshallese landowners and workers protested against these conditions during the 1970s and 1980s. They decried army regulations that increasingly restricted Marshallese access to Kwajalein's shopping and medical facilities, and they pointed out that the army continued to pay a miniscule amount to lease Marshallese land. While these protests succeeded in increasing lease payments, Kwajalein remains a space of surveillance and segregation today. For the past three decades, Marshallese workers have passed through security en route to Ebeye to ensure they have not illegally purchased or removed anything from Kwajalein (19).

While Kwajalein's story of suburban containment in the middle of the Pacific governed through army regulations is unique, the island's security structure shares commonalities with the increasing surveillance apparatus characterizing American suburbia in recent decades. Scholars such as Mike Davis and Elaine Tyler May have commented on the growing obsession with home security: the "fortress" style of living and "bunker mentality" that characterize suburbia, as Americans have increasingly retreated to gated communities (20). Davis even reveals how some wealthy Los Angeles family neighborhoods have begun employing architects who borrow "design secrets from overseas embassies and military command posts" to build multi-million-dollar homes aimed at "absolute security" (21). Thus, while Kwajalein's story illuminates one example of suburbia exported to a militarized space in the U.S. imperial Pacific, it is clear that military structures of surveillance have also increasingly moved into continental suburban and elite urban landscapes.

Conclusion

The history of Kwajalein's transformation into a U.S. domestic space resides at the intersection of the growing U.S. military imperial industrial complex during the Cold War and the emergence of 1950s suburbanization (22). Kwajalein was perhaps the most striking manifestation of American exceptionalism, where suburbanization produced U.S. domesticity on a foreign landscape. Military planners attempted to replicate the secure suburban refuge in the most insecure of spaces. But army efforts to normalize Kwajalein as a space of suburban domesticity entailed both the physical exclusion of Marshallese from the island and the ideological reframing of them as foreign to that space. The island's story reveals how U.S. national security increasingly depended upon the insecurity of many colonized peoples coming under the regime of this emerging military empire during the Cold War. In some respects Kwajalein's spatial containment and military surveillance created a structure enabling the army to perfect a model of confined and segregated suburban refuge for American nuclear families never fully achieved in continental suburbia. Thus, Kwajalein's story offers us an insightful window into 1950s American culture by bridging stories of suburbanization, empire, and U.S. and Pacific history during the Cold War. □

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