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Happy savages

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"Thirty seconds to zero . . . six, five, four, three, two, one."

Suddenly a big orange blossom fills the screen, accompanied by ukuleles and lovely -- I mean Strangelovian -- Polynesian music. The blossom is actually Castle Bravo, a 15-megaton hydrogen bomb blast, the largest U.S. test ever, detonated over Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954.

This is a few minutes into "Nuclear Savage: The Island Experiments of Secret Project 4.1," one of the most disturbing documentaries I've ever seen, and one of seven feature-length films that are part of Chicago's Fourth Annual Peace on Earth Film Festival, Feb. 23 to 26, at the Chicago Cultural Center. The event, once again, is free of charge.

Peace on earth?

The film festival seeks to "enlighten and to empower individuals, families and communities to step out of the ignorance of conflict . . ."

I take a deep breath and think about Nuclear Savage, a film by former Greenpeace activist Adam Jonas Horowitz, which opens up one of the hidden horrors of American history -- analogous to our history of slavery, lynching and Jim Crow -- but perpetrated on the far side of the world, with nuclear weapons.

"Nuclear Savage" is the story of what we did to the Marshall Islanders throughout the Cold War with our nuclear-testing program. Not only did we expose many thousands of them to ghastly -- often lethal -- levels of radiation with 67 nuclear blasts, with glaring evidence that at

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least some of the exposure was intentional, done for the purpose of studying the effects of radiation on human guinea pigs; not only did we wreck the Marshall Islanders' way of life and pristine paradise, creating a nation of internal refugees confined to a Western-style slum on the island of Ebeye; not only did we cower, as a nation, from any real responsibility for what our fallout did to these people, settling our genocidal debt to them with \$150 million "for all claims, past, present and future"; but also, throughout our dealing with them as nuclear conquistadors, we displayed a racism so profound, so cold-blooded, its exposure must forever shatter the myth of American exceptionalism.

And we're still doing it. The tiny, impoverished Republic of the Marshall Islands recently signed a 75-year lease agreement with the United States, guaranteeing that the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on Kwajalien Atoll, where Star Wars testing is still being conducted (for unfathomable billions of dollars), will be operational at least through 2086.

"John is a savage, but a happy, amenable savage." Thus intones the voice on a '50s-era newsreel clip in the documentary, showing footage of seven male Marshall Islanders who have been brought to the United States for radiation testing. "John is mayor of Rongelap Atoll. John reads, knows about God and is a pretty good mayor."

The film does a stunning job juxtaposing examples of our smug ignorance of South Sea culture with the reality of what we did to it. John the happy savage is actually John Anjain, who is one of many former residents of Rongelap Atoll interviewed in the film. He talks about his thyroid cancer, the thyroid cancer of three of his children and one grandson, and about the death of another son from leukemia.

Rongelap was heavily contaminated by the Castle Bravo blast. The official explanation is that the wind suddenly shifted. Many of the islanders believe that the wind direction was known and the blast occurred anyway. The U.S. Navy waited several days before evacuating the island. In 1957, the Rongelapese were told their island was safe again -- a blatant untruth -- and were transported back to their ancestral home, where they proceeded to die of cancer and give birth to large numbers of stillborn, deformed children. The bodies of many of the islanders were removed by U.S. personnel and examined.

"My first child born did not look human," one of the islanders said. "It was like a bunch of grapes. The second came out limp, with no muscles or bones at all. It was like a monster, a jellyfish, completely limp. It was a jellyfish baby."

A year before they were moved back to Rongelap, Merrill Eisenbud, the first health and safety chief of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, had said, according to the transcript of a 1956 meeting: "That island is by far the most contaminated place on earth and it would be very interesting to get a measure of human uptake when people live in a contaminated environment. . . . While it is true that these people do not live the way Westerners do, civilized people, it is also true that these people are more like us than the mice."

They lived on Rongelap till 1985, when they were finally evacuated, not by the United States, which refused to do so, but in the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior. They took everything, including their dismantled homes; they left behind only their cemetery.

Thinking about this extraordinary documentary in the context of the Peace on Earth Film Festival, I am mostly aware of the gap the film exposes: between the ideals of most of the world's population and the interests of the powerful. We're a long way from peace, and maybe we always will be, but never have I felt a stronger urge to work for it.

(Robert Koehler, an award-winning, Chicago-based journalist, is a nationally syndicated writer. You can respond to this column at koehlercw@gmail.com or visit his Web site at commonwonders.com.)