

Ron Hirschbein

PICNICKING IN THE AFTERGLOW OF THE BOMB: THE EVIL OF BANALITY

The day before Kim Jong Il boasted about his first nuclear test I witnessed festivities at the site of the first American test: the Trinity Test Site--a place called "*Jornada del Muetro*" (the official literature didn't mention the English translation—"Journey of Death"). Dear Leader Kim relied on 1984-style propaganda to bedazzle his hapless subjects. As I strolled between the picnickers and souvenir stands at America's Ground Zero I realized that such overt propaganda is superfluous in our not-so-brave new world. I witnessed (with apologies to Hannah Arendt) the evil of banality: the world's first nuclear blast--a portent of destruction that spewed radiation over a wide swath of America--was reduced to just another spectacle and commodity. Witnesses to the first test, those who were "there at creation," were awestruck: the effects were "stupendous and terrifying . . . it beggared description." These days all that was sacred is profaned: a realization that occurred as I munched fabled New Mexico green chili burritos and marveled at slogans emblazoned on t-shirts: "Trinity Test Site: I Glow in the Dark!"

This sojourn on the *Jornada del Muetro* culminated the University of New Mexico's Conference on the Early History of the Atomic Bomb. The Conference prepared me for the visit in unexpected ways. Evangelists from the Sandia and Los Alamos National Laboratories did not disappoint. However, the commercialized vulgarity at the official museums was unexpected—it gave kitsch a bad name. Predictably, Albuquerque's Atomic Museum (funded by a variety of military contractors) highlighted mockups of Fat Man, Little Boy, and an assortment of latter-day nukes. But, like much else in American culture, weapons of mass destruction were a laughing matter. (Remember Bush's burlesque performance at the March 2004 Correspondents' Banquet when he looked for WMDs behind the curtains and in desk drawers?) The exhibit highlighting the Bikini Test (which forever contaminated the Marshall Islands) featured a scant bikini swimsuit draped over a map of the ill-fated archipelago. And, like any museum worthy of its name



there was a gift shop featuring T-shirts, atomic shot glasses, and bottled



atomic firewater. The worst, however, was yet to come. I encountered the offspring of an unnatural act between Dr. Strangelove and Chuck E. Cheese. A gaily colored banner, just around the corner from the weapons of mass destruction, advertised the Birthday Party Room: "An exciting spot for fun, games, cake and ice cream." They called it the "Zoom Zone," and it hyped "hands-on" activities. (Be the first kid on you block to detonate an A-bomb?) Imagine what "fair and balanced" Fox News would say about Osama bin Laden Jr. celebrating his birthday amid weapons of mass destruction at camp al Qaeda.

Los Alamos disappointed. Despite the fact that we were accompanied by a special security agent (who seemed more like a park ranger than a merchant of death) we were only granted a "windshield tour" of top secret areas—we remained on the bus. A huge sign at the guard station laid down the law: no weapons or injurious substances are allowed inside the gate! The