

What's Wrong With Nuclear Power?

Cracked, Corrupt, Corroded

Adam Baum

1995

Nuclear power is a primary threat in the ongoing global environmental struggles at the end of the twentieth century. However, nuclear power is an issue many shy away from because of its complex and technical nature and the opaque power structures of gigantic corporations and government bureaucracy that perpetuates this dangerous, decaying technology.

Americans are bombarded yearly by multi-million dollar nuclear industry-sponsored propaganda in national print and electronic media selling lies and half-truths to encourage the public to ignore news stories on the collapse of the Chernobyl cleanup effort in Belarus or the proposed siting of a nuclear waste dump in their watershed or on an earthquake fault. After all, they assure us, nuclear power reduces our foreign oil imports and cuts down on the greenhouse effect. Never mind those cracking reactor parts, future meltdowns, a mountain of eternal nuclear waste, criminal plutonium diversion, threats of nuclear sabotage, and the roar of a financial black hole that will suck money forever.

Eight years after Chernobyl confirmed the world's worst nightmares about nuclear accidents and fifteen years after Three Mile Island (TMI) came within an hour of melting into the Pennsylvania soil, the informed lay person's review of what's actually wrong with nuclear power may be in order.

Catastrophic Reactor Accidents (Meltdowns & the "China Syndrome")

In the old, old U.S Atomic Energy Commission days of the 1950s and '60s, the experts would flat out tell the public that it just wouldn't happen. And while they were promoting "the friendly Atom" in American living rooms, they were dusting them with radioactive fallout from nuclear weapons tests and reactor meltdown. Even with the media machine at full tilt, the prospect for establishing nuclear power as a viable industry was so shaky in the hey days of the 50s that prospective investors in the "peaceful atom," demanded financial immunity from lawsuits stemming from damages sustained from catastrophic nuclear accidents. Congress compliantly passed the Price-Anderson Act which limits liability by individual utilities and passes the cost of damages on to the federal government. The nuclear power industry could only develop with this government guarantee in place. So much for the free market.

The AEC and today's Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) have lied about reactor safety all along. The AEC's own studies completed in 1957 and 1965 projected what Chernobyl told the world in 1986: many thousands of cancer deaths, immune deficiency and failure to thrive among countless children to follow, and entire bioregions rendered uninhabitable and timelessly contaminated.

In the two decades before Three Mile Island and Jane Fonda's "China Syndrome" film brought the concept of commercial nuclear danger into living color, the atomic power nightmare grew like a cancer in a long obituary: Windscale, Kyshtym, Hanford, Fermi 1, West Valley, Browns Ferry, and on and on. Three months before the TMI incident in 1979, the nuclear industry paraded a report before the public authored by a Dr. Norman Rasmussen

and his esteemed associates at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology concluding a threat of a reactor accident endangering a U.S. city was comparable to the likelihood of a catastrophic meteor strike or the crash of a jumbo jet into the World Series—take your pick.

Then Three Mile Island melted down. The American nuclear techno-elite insisted, after they “disappeared” the first sixteen hours of radiation release data on the March 28 meltdown, that “the system had worked.” When Chernobyl blew seven years later, the best and the brightest of America’s nuclear propaganda ministers were left with only a line borrowed from Frank Zappa: “It can’t happen heere.”

Yet only a year before the disaster in Ukraine, in April 1985, the NRC gave Congress a more candid nuclear meltdown risk assessment: a 45% probability of a major accident at one of the 100 U.S. reactors during a twenty year period. Fifteen years after TMI, the industry operates 109 reactors in this country. We’re due. Beneath the arrogant and confident facade, the class of men at the top of the nuclear industry are recklessly gambling with omnicide.

Nuclear Economics

Nuclear economics is an oxymoron tantamount to Orwell’s “War is Peace.” Last time I checked, nuclear power plants cost billions of dollars and even “radical” publications like *The Wall Street Journal* were saying it costs as much to decommission U.S. nuclear reactors as it takes to build them. Nuclear power is a dead duck in the U.S., and while no American utility is going to order up a new Westinghouse AP-600 atomic power plant, today’s reactor manufacturers looks to the Asian market for new orders.

U.S. reactors are rapidly aging and deteriorating while their operation and repair costs are increasing, making them economically infeasible even leaving aside safety considerations Shearson-Lehman Brothers, the Wall Street utility investment bank, has projected that 25 U.S. reactors are likely to “prematurely” shut down over the next several years—if they don’t break apart first.

Nuclear Waste

Nuclear waste is forever. We must stop generating it immediately. The people in white lab coats are having a hard time explaining this “problem” away. The hottest variety of waste, irradiated fuel rods, are going to be around for millions of years and must be stored securely for that time.

Five decades of research have gone into finding a permanent site for nuclear waste. The government is currently “screw-tinizing” Yucca Mountain, Nevada as a dump although a 1992 earthquake inflicted heavy damage at the Department of Energy’s research office there, and the region has been determined to be volcanically active.

Congressional Republicrats are planning to rewrite the Nuclear Waste Policy Act in 1995 to weaken the bill’s restrictions. They want to let the constipated nukes take a big nuclear dump either through or in your community. Rep. John Dingell (D-MI) and Sen. Bennett Johnston (D-LA) are championing efforts to wipe the nuclear industry’s radioactive asshole. They plan to legislate the forced burial of irradiated reactor fuel at the Yucca site and permit burying “low level” radwaste in a number of states including Texas and California. The Johnston/ Dingell “Bury Bill” is the industry’s long hoped for solution to what even the utilities agree is the major problem confronting nuclear power plants.

Mass action is essential now. We must excise an industry and a paradigm which permits profligate consumption and waste at the expense of a thousand generations to come and ultimately the biosphere of the planet.

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