

Beyond Fukushima: A World in Denial About Nuclear Risks

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Theme: [Environment](#)

In-depth Report: [Nuclear War](#)

What will it take for our world to recognize the dangers that nuclear scientists and even Albert Einstein were warning about at the “dawn” of the nuclear age?

Amy Goodman reminds us of the prophetic statement by Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett who tried to find words to describe the horror he was seeing in Hiroshima in 1945 after the bomb fell.

“It looks as if a monster steamroller had passed over it and squashed it out of existence. I write these facts ... as a warning to the world.”

The world heard his warning, but seems to have ignored it. In fact, what followed has been decades of nuclear proliferation, the spread of nuclear power plants and the escalation of the arms race with new higher tech weaponry.

As Hiroshima becomes yesterday’s distant memory and Fukushima the current threat, the full extent of the casualties and body count are not yet in, partly because the Japanese government and the power companies don’t want to alarm the public.

Years earlier, a similar cover-up was in effect at Three Mile Island complex in Pennsylvania where reports of the damage people suffered from a serious accident was minimized, never examined in depth by some of the very same media outlets who are today criticizing Japan for a lack of transparency.

On August, 6, 2008, the anniversary of the dropping of the first nuclear bomb, Alternet.org reported that the government and media were complicit in minimizing public awareness of the extensive suffering that did take place:

“But the word never crossed the conceptual chasm between the “mainstream” media and the “alternative.” Despite a federal class action lawsuit filed by 2400 Pennsylvania families claiming damages from the accident, despite at least \$15 million quietly paid to parents children with birth defects, despite three decades of official admissions that nobody knows how much radiation escaped from TMI, where it went or who it affected, not a mention of the fact that people might have been killed there made its way into a corporate report”

Was this just accidental or is there a deeper pattern of denial? The great expert on psycho history, Robert J. Lifton, wrote a book, Hiroshima In America, with journalist Greg Mitchell about the aftermath of Hiroshima in America exploring what they call “50 years of denial.”

One reviewer explained, “The authors examine what they perceive to be a conspiracy by the government to mislead and suppress information about the actual bombing, Truman’s decision to drop the bomb, and the birth and mismanagement of the beginning of the nuclear age. The authors claim that Americans then, and now, are haunted by the devastating psychological effects of the bomb.”

Lifton and Mitchell are evidence-based writers, not conspiratologists, but they could find no other explanation for how such a seminal event could have been distorted and misrepresented for a half century.

Nuclear power and nuclear weapons have been sold to the public relentlessly, in the first instance as necessary, and the second, as safe. Rory O’ Connor and Richard Bell coined the term “Nuke Speak” to describe the Orwellian methods deployed by the nuclear industry’s PR offensive in a book length analysis of a well funded campaign that continues to this day using euphemistic language to mask its real agenda.

And today, as the world watches the dreadful and even Darwinian struggle for survival by the earthquake and tsunami victims in Japan, as information about the extent of the nuclear danger trickles out, President Obama has reaffirmed his commitment to build new nuclear plants.

Others stress more parochial concerns. The TV Production community fears a shortage in Japanese made magnetic and recording tape. Consumers are being told that they may face a delay in ordering new iPads so get your orders in now. And, the Israeli new service YNET says people there worry about a sushi shortage.

Meanwhile, in Germany, more than 50,000 activists took to the streets in protest, but, so far, there has been no organized outcry here in the U.S. At the Left Forum in New York, the issue was barely addressed in the opening plenary.

On the right, flamboyant talking head/provocateur Ann Coulter defended the imagined health benefits of a release of radiation to counter what she calls the alarmism of the environmentalists. She calls it a “cancer vaccine.”

In a talk during a recent visit to Iran, which insists it is not making nuclear weapons, I raised questions about what their government said they want to do: expand their nuclear power plants. When I questioned the wisdom of that approach, I was jeered because they felt I was challenging their “right” to have what other countries have, their right to “progress.” The thought that the plants could be dangerous was dismissed,

What they don’t seem to know and what millions in Japan are finding out is this technology—with spent rods that are never “spent” and the nuclear waste that will outlive us all— is inherently unsafe. Jonathan Schell makes this point well in a recent essay in the Nation:

“The chain of events at the reactors now running out of control provides a case history of the underlying mismatch between human nature and the force we imagine we can control. Nuclear power is a complex, high technology. But the things that endemically malfunction are of a humble kind.

The art of nuclear power is to boil water with the incredible heat generated by a nuclear

chain reaction. But such temperatures necessitate continuous cooling. Cooling requires pumps. Pumps require conventional power. These are the things that habitually go wrong—and have gone wrong in Japan. A backup generator shuts down. A battery runs out. The pump grinds to a halt. You might suppose that it is easy to pump water into a big container, and that is usually true, but the best-laid plans go awry from time to time. Sometimes the problem is a tsunami, and sometimes it is an operator asleep at the switch.”

As the “incident” records of our own Nuclear Regulatory Agency make clear, these are not just Japanese problems. The Christian Science Monitor reports, “The Nuclear Regulatory Commission failed to resolve known safety problems, leading to 14 ‘near-misses’ in US nuclear power plants in 2009 and 2010, according to a new report from a nuclear watchdog group.”

We don’t even know the full of the extent of the accidents, unintentional releases of radiation and other problems in this country much less in others with fewer rules and less oversight. No one expected Chernobyl to explode, claiming so many lives; no one knows where the next disaster will occur.

Bernie Sandeers is calling for a full investigation of nuclear safety here. Ralph Nader writes, “The unfolding multiple nuclear reactor catastrophe in Japan is prompting overdue attention to the 104 nuclear plants in the United States – many of them aging, many of them near earthquake faults, some on the west coast exposed to potential tsunamis.”

The global nuclear roulette game goes on. Even moderate and restrained criticisms are dismissed until there is an “event” that cannot be denied. Nuclear energy supporters promise that “Gen 4,” the next generation of reactors, will be much safer.

Problem solved? Not everyone thinks so. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists carries an assessment by Hugh Gusterson on “The Lessons of Fukushima.”

“To this anthropologist, then, the lesson of Fukushima is not that we now know what we need to know to design the perfectly safe reactor, but that the perfectly safe reactor is always just around the corner. It is technoscientific hubris to think otherwise.

This leaves us with a choice between walking back from a technology that we decide is too dangerous or normalizing the risks of nuclear energy and accepting that an occasional Fukushima is the price we have to pay for a world with less carbon dioxide. It is wishful thinking to believe there is a third choice of nuclear energy without nuclear accidents.”

We are still debating if nuclear power is worth the risk as irradiated clouds float over Los Angeles and there is a panicked run in the public to buy iodine pills. The industry’s marketing machine is in crisis response mode and hasn’t missed a beat, while many of us look on with a sense of impotence as we are told, once again, what’s in our best interest.

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