

TMI 10 years later: News lies never stop

by Marjorie Mazel Hecht

Ten years after the nuclear accident at the Three Mile Island plant in Pennsylvania, the press coverage of this 10th anniversary is most notable for what it omits. First, it ignores the fact that no one was injured and it continues to convey the same kind of hysteria about radiation that marked the event itself. Second, it ignores the fact that millions of deaths have occurred because of the slowdown of nuclear power after TMI. Third, it omits any mention of the fact that the accident was most likely not an accident, but the result of anti-nuclear sabotage.

On the question of radiation: There is no excuse for any news reporters to be ignorant of the actual radiation effects of TMI. Of the 10 major governmental and independent studies that assessed the accident at TMI Unit 2, there is total agreement that the minute amount of radiation released could cause *no detectable health effects on residents in the area at the time of the accident or in the future.*

To make this specific: The highest possible whole body dose of radiation to any one individual in the TMI area was 100 millirems, which is about the equivalent that the average American receives every year simply from natural background radiation (cosmic rays, the ground, building materials, and internal body sources). Man-made sources add approximately another 100 millirems per year per person, on average.

To get this highest possible radiation dose, the person would have had to stand naked at the plant boundary throughout the first days of the accident, which, most assuredly, nobody—even reporters—did. For the vast majority of area residents, the average radiation exposure within 10 miles of TMI was about 8 millirems, while the average exposure to individuals within 50 miles was less than 1.5 millirems.

Given these facts, there is no explanation for an alert reporter today conveying fear about radiation damage from the accident—except that the reporter intends to perpetuate the lies that foster the anti-nuclear movement. One such national broadcast example of deliberate hysteria was the March 29 “Morning Edition” report on National Public Radio by Cokie Roberts, who was advertised as having covered the accident for NPR in 1979.

Roberts treated her listeners to three hysterical responses from local TMI residents. One protested that residents were never told the truth about radiation releases, either in 1979 or later. Then a 65-year-old former nurse who had joined the anti-nukes broke down in sobs, crying, “This isn’t for my-

self. . . . They’re killing our children” (more sobs). The third interviewee, the mayor of Middletown, where TMI is located, then asserted several times that studies of health effects were promised but never done. I’ve never seen a single study, he railed.

Now, it is virtually impossible that the mayor (and Roberts, for that matter) would not have seen any one of the many studies by the Pennsylvania Department of Health and other governmental bodies—or have known where to go to find them. Clearly, the purpose here is to encourage listeners to enter the same irrational fear state evidenced by the first two women interviewed.

The dangers of not going nuclear

There has indeed been real killing in the wake of TMI, but these are the millions of deaths caused by *not* going nuclear. In fact, the lives of millions in the developing sector would have been saved had their economies had the benefit of the increased growth rate (at least 3%) made possible by nuclear power. As calculated by the Fusion Energy Foundation in a 1982 study, if the United States had carried through with the Atoms for Peace program of the early 1960s, some 115 million people would not have died between the years 1965 and 1980.

It is no mystery then why the very promise of nuclear energy—its capability for fueling economic prosperity and population growth—is what spurs its chief opposition. Today’s malthusian environmentalists oppose fission energy because it means that there are no limits to growth.

The slowdown of the U.S. nuclear industry did not begin on March 28, 1979, when the Three Mile Island accident occurred. The Carter administration was imposing energy austerity and bankrolling the nascent environmentalist movement. Jane Fonda’s anti-nuclear *China Syndrome* film had just been released. The goal was to stop the growth of nuclear power and with it, scientific optimism.

After the TMI accident, the nuclear industry retreated, too cowardly to take on the spread of environmentalist lies by aggressively stating the truth. What might have been simply an incident that showed the ultimate safety of U.S. nuclear plants was turned into a nuclear defeat. Since 1979, there have been no new U.S. orders for nuclear plants; in fact, no nuclear plant that was ordered since 1973 is operating or will be completed in the United States.

Was it sabotage? The chain of failures at TMI had a mathematical probability of 1 in 1,000,000 of occurring in series, and sabotage had been confirmed at other U.S. plants. Yet, not one of the many commissions investigating events at TMI 2 pursued the question of sabotage, and the plant staff was never required to take lie detector tests. Interestingly, TMI marked the public debut of the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s emergency government, which was set into operation by the National Security Council March 27, just one day before the incident.