

The Truth About 'Nuclear Power Plant Terrorism'

Various hypothetical scenarios for acts of sabotage against a nuclear power plant or some part of the nuclear fuel reprocessing cycle have been conducted through the media with an increasing frequency and intensity over the past few months. The objective, presumably, is to convince the public that such an act, which most people correctly believe to be impossible, could actually happen. The scenario usually ends with the saboteur(s) getting their hands on some plutonium (the scenario-spinners seem to have given up on the highly enriched uranium route, since they apparently can't convince anyone of that one anymore) and turning it into a nuclear bomb.

These fantasies have been the vehicles for some major attacks against the commercial nuclear power industry

— which is absolutely the last place anyone who is really serious about making a bomb would go. Plutonium from commercial nuclear reactors is very poor bomb material, since it is diluted with non-fissionable plutonium. This fact, combined with the near-zero probability that anyone could actually get their hands on plutonium in a useable form from commercial reactors or their fuel cycle, exposes these scenarios for what they really are — hoaxes meant to scare the public into accepting some alternative energy program.

In fact, the frequency of such proposed nuclear terrorism scenarios hitting the front pages appears to be increasing at a rate about equal to the escalation of outstanding bad loans now being held by the Chase Manhattan Bank, the IMF and other Wall Street-based

What Would Really Happen If Terrorists Really Seized A Nuke Plant

By now, every civic-minded American is supposed to know that the main reason why America must give up nuclear energy and "conserve" itself back to the Stone Age is because of the danger of nuclear terrorism. President Carter says so, James Schlesinger says so, a lot of the press says so.

Consider this:

A terrorist team, after years of preparation finally attacks a nuclear power station in the Northeast U.S. Intricate alarm systems are neutralized by terrorists infiltrated into the plant's staff, and the plant's security forces are taken unawares; after several gun battles with guards through the plant, the terrorists make their way to the control room. The plant is theirs! The terrorists broadcast their demands to the world.

They threaten to overload the reactor and blow it up. Right? They threaten to steal deadly plutonium and poison the atmosphere, killing thousands. Right? Well, not exactly....

Suppose our terrorists try to make good on their threats. They start the reactor into a rapid power increase, but, alas, only to find that the safety system automatically shuts down the reactor completely. Subsequent tries to start it up again fail, also because of other fail-safe systems. They finally give up when the reactor operators convince them it would take hours to re-start the reactor, and that there is no way to bypass the safety systems and cause an overload.

The terrorists then decide that they will move to their fall-back threat: they will break open the reactor and steal the deadly plutonium. (We beg the

reader's pardon at this point and ask him or her to ignore the fact that you can't really steal reactor plutonium: reactor plutonium comes in one-ton rods which are so radioactive that they have to sit around for six months before they are moved — with the help of enormous, remotely controlled machinery.)

Just for this purpose, the terrorist team has brought with them satchels of powerful plastique explosive. Their first task is to blast their way into the reactor building from the control room: The reactor building is automatically sealed during operation, with no human entry possible, and is even more stringently sealed after the safety system is activated.

Finally, after blasting their way into the reactor building, the terrorists are faced with a several-foot thick concrete wall and a 12-inch thick steel vessel. Little did they know that reactors are designed to withstand huge operating pressures and even greater blast pressures without failure. Needless to say, the terrorists' explosives only chipped away some concrete before they ran out of explosives and gave up.

The terrorists are demoralized; nothing seems to work. Finally, the terrorist leader hits upon an idea: what they need to break open the reactor is a small nuclear device. Now, all they have to do is steal an A-bomb...

Jon Gilbertson, a member of the U.S. Labor Party's Research and Development Staff, is a nuclear engineer and has helped design safety systems for nuclear plants.