



PERSPECTIVES

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Nuclear culture not just waste needs cleanup

Billions of dollars are being spent in the effort to clean up Hanford and other nuclear installations.

But although removal, or "defusing," of dangerous debris is advancing, little or no attention is being paid to the "nuclear culture."

In war, truth always has been the first casualty. Secrecy about troop movements, new weapons and other military matters is necessary. But when secrecy becomes an obsession, with few — or no — safeguards against abuses, in a free, democratic society the reckless and the power-hungry in authority can become greater threats than the enemy.

So tightly held was the secret of the Manhattan Project that not until he had been sworn in as president was Harry Truman told the United States had made an atomic bomb. As a senator he had been waved off by the Secretary of State from investigating Hanford and other nuclear installations. Not even as vice president had he been entrusted with the secret.

Americans find shocking some of the things they now are learning about the nuclear program. Other disclosures are horrifying:

- Once-secret files reveal national security was routinely invoked to cover up safety and management problems at Hanford and other nuclear plants.

- The Department of Energy has acknowledged thousands of Americans were exposed to radioactivity during accidents and normal plant operation.

- Government scientists have been fired for disagreeing publicly with the "official line" on radiation.

It was official policy not to warn people living downwind from bomb tests in Nevada that fallout could be dangerous. Government agents told them they had no cause for worry.

They began to worry, however, when their livestock died in large numbers, when husbands, wives and children sickened and died.

Survivors sued, but a federal court of appeals cited the doctrine of sovereign immunity — the king can do no wrong. Even though some of the government actions were "negligent or wrong in some cases," said the judges, they were nevertheless necessary "in light of national and international security."

The Supreme Court refused to take the case.

Declassified documents show health of officers and members of the Atomic Energy Commission often discussed the large number of overexposures at the Nevada Test Site. But the commissioners decided not to reduce the exposures or to tell the workers of the danger because doing so might have meant making changes that would have halted testing.

At issue in pending lawsuits is whether the government failed to protect workers from exposures it knew could cause harm. Litigants include uranium miners, ranchers who lived downwind from the Nevada test site, soldiers who were marched into the blast areas, residents of areas surrounding Hanford, and present and former Hanford workers.

Once-secret documents disclose AEC officials viewed as public relations problems the cloud of radioactive iodine I-131 released from Hanford in 1949, and of radioruthenium in 1954. "Nothing is to be gained by informing the public," said an official report.

Children, babies and fetuses are particularly sensitive to I-131, a toxic element that tends to concentrate in the thyroid gland.

However callous such thinking, even worse was the use of Americans as guinea pigs in medical experiments involving the injection, or swallowing, of plutonium. Such experiments rival those performed during the war by Japanese and German scientists, including the Nazi monster Josef Mengele.

The AEC, created by our government in 1946 as an equal partner of the Central Intelligence Agency, became a "shadow government" answerable to almost no one. Its protocols, a critic concludes, "were treated as gospels of the atomic age."

Those gospels were rigidly enforced from the beginning of the Manhattan Project in 1943.

Although those responsible for nuclear development knew radiation can sicken and kill humans and animals, they consistently insisted if there was danger it was only minimal. And they repeatedly subverted civil rights in the name of national security.

How many Americans, through accident, blunder or deliberate calculation, were exposed to unsafe levels of radiation can only be guessed. But The New York Times, using government and other sources, has estimated the number at 2 million, including 120,000 "people living near Hanford ... from the late 1940s through the early '60s."

The AEC was dismantled in 1974 and in 1990 Congress, which during and after World War II abrogated its responsibilities to oversee the government and protect the people, began fumbling with the problem of restitution by passing the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.

Whatever can be done must be done to comfort those Americans victimized in the name of national security. Nor should Congress and the president rest until reliable safeguards are in place against another "nuclear culture" being spawned in some future war or other crisis.

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