

# Three Mile Island

## A dry run for crisis management news control

*No specialist who has studied the facts of the case could effectively argue with the conclusion that the nuclear crisis at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania during March 28-April 2 was part sabotage, part hoax. The sequence of mechanical mishaps at the plant had a probability in the range of hundreds of thousands to one. Yet the Nuclear Regulatory Commission was declaring a state of emergency when none was warranted by the accident's consequences nor warranted by the NRC's own standards for an emergency.*

*The NRC, other federal officials, and the Governor of Pennsylvania apparently muzzled utility officials, and then spoke to the press in "doomsday" terms of "meltdown," "H-blasts," and "precautionary evacuations"—and continued to do so after the entire incident was over. The news media took care of the rest.*

*Executive Intelligence Review learned last week that the Federal Emergency Management Agency, set up to handle "national emergencies" and scheduled to begin functioning April 1, became operational on March 27—a full day before the "nuclear accident."*

*FEMA personnel, under the direction of the National Security Council and a White House Emergency Task Force, coordinated the emergency evacuation panic scenario; while the NSC's Jack Watson and NRC personnel managed the content and flow of news.*

*We have also learned that this agency and its functioning is based on a policy memorandum—PRM-32—drafted by Trilateral Commission strategist Sam Huntington which outlined a very specific scenario for crisis management reorganization of the U.S. government—a scenario which was tested during the Three Mile Island incident.*

*In the following grid, we counterpose the reports from the press and the NRC with the facts as presented by a team of experts from the Fusion Energy Foundation and the U.S. Labor Party at an April 6 joint press conference in New York.*

—Vin Berg

### What happened

### What press and NRC said

March 28

By improbable coincidence, the main secondary feedwater flow system fails; the auxiliary (emergency) feedwater flow system fails; as primary cooling system heats up in consequence, the reactor immediately shuts down; pressure relief valve fails, sticking open, causing tank overflow and spillage onto containment floor.

Because of the improbable coincidence and "operator error" (sometime during first hour) the core twice becomes partially uncovered, causing a small amount of fission gas to be released into primary coolant.

**Situation:** *Within 45 seconds, reactor shut down. Within 3 hours, reactor core fully stabilized. Relief valve closed and primary and secondary cooling systems put into operation. All emergency core-cooling systems work perfectly, core meltdown never being a possibility.*

Nuclear Regulatory Commission press release outlines basic developments and announces that an emergency situation has been declared at site. Six NRC personnel already on-site; team being formed to monitor every action taken by Metropolitan Edison plant operators.

By official NRC standards defining an "emergency," no emergency situation could be said to exist, nor did one. The declaration's effect was to put plant under direct NRC supervision.

Radio news reports "worst accident in the history of commercial power."

## What happened

## What press and NRC said

### March 29

During the night, small amount of fission gas is released into the atmosphere from the auxiliary building, through the gas storage system, and out the plant waste-gas stack, according to plan. Purpose was to prevent fission gas build-up in auxiliary building tanks, and in building atmosphere. Levels of emission were within normal release limits—a very low, 1 millirem/hour.

**Situation:** *Reactor remains stable and cool (250F) at pressure of 450 psi.*

*New York Times* reports: "Radiation Is Released in Accident at Nuclear Plant in Pennsylvania." "Above Normal Levels." "General Emergency Declared."

*Baltimore Sun* reports: "Radioactive Gases Escape From Pa. Plant."

An official NRC press release says "Radiation levels in the containment building remain high ... detectable levels continue to be released into atmosphere ... the source of the gas is the auxiliary building...."

### March 30

Utility officials release gas from auxiliary building twice more, for 45-60 minute periods, at maximum levels of 25 Mrems (lower at a distance). Radiation dose rates, even on site, are far below hazardous (one dental X-ray equals 20 Mrems). Some waste water released into Susquehanna River, at radioactive level well within NRC regulation.

Gas bubbles detected within primary coolant system are carefully monitored as they collect at top of reactor vessel. Such noncondensable fission gases (plus hydrogen) are routinely taken out through pressurizer's free surface; the technique proceeds more slowly than normal, only because of the larger than usual amount of gas caused by the mishap.

**Situation:** *No problems are occurring in planned gas emissions or bubble dissipation. None were anticipated. Reactor remained stable at 280F and 1,000 psi. No radiation in any form has escaped from the plant, except according to plan.*

*New York Post* reports: "Nuke Control!" "An uncontrolled release of radiation spewed from the Three Mile Island plant today, triggering some panic in the streets here, where people alerted by Civil Defense whistles, ran for cover." Accompanying articles' themes included: "Fall-out Vigil Begins Here" (Albany, N.Y.). "N.Y. Farmers Told to Keep Cattle Inside."

Pennsylvania Governor Richard Thornburgh orders all schools within a 5-mile radius closed; advises pregnant women and school children to evacuate; all persons within 10-mile radius to stay inside. The governor says: "These emissions were unexpected and they could not stop it." He said that he was considering evacuation of 950,000 people in 4 surrounding counties.

NRC officials say: "Detectable radiation has spread over 4 counties ... the accident was due to faulty nuclear safety systems."

### March 31

Technicians release fission gas once more at even lower levels than previously (1.5 Mrem/hour). Gas bubble at top of reactor vessel estimated at 1,000 cubic feet (now believed to have been smaller). Gas bubble remains far above reactor core region, and cannot move down toward core because of the velocity of the upward coolant flow. While the bubble grows very slowly, the coolant flow is sweeping the gas through outlet nozzles, breaking it up into small bubbles, which are coming out of the pressurizer surface—according to normal mechanisms.

**Situation:** *Reactor remains stable. Gas bubble is rapidly dissipating. Bubble even at its largest never threatens reactor core, nor could it have because of upward coolant flow. There is no possibility of gas spreading downward to pose danger of core meltdown. If needed, emergency core cooling systems are fully operational. Meltdown is a technical impossibility.*

A senior NRC official states that a meltdown is a definite possibility. NRC Commissioner Denton says: "This is easily the most serious nuclear power accident in the program's history." Another NRC official says "We face the ultimate risk of a meltdown."

*New York Daily News* reports: "Nuclear Crisis!" "Pregnant women, kids flee." "Fear meltdown of Nuclear Core." "In a matter of minutes, the core can melt to form a glowing, radioactive ball weighing 100 tons or more ... melt through the thick reinforced structure ... deep into the ground.... Underground water would flash into steam ... break through the surface spreading radioactive contamination over a large area. Thus, the China Syndrome."

President Carter orders National Security Advisor Brzezinski to set up special communications system and special interagency team under NSC.

## What happened

Technicians are "baffled"—over how the gas bubble has dissipated so quickly. The bubble has all but disappeared, by the mechanisms begun the previous day. This also *proves* how small the bubble was, in fact.

Further emissions of gas into the atmosphere are effected at little more than "background" levels. It is estimated that total dosages received by any off-site individual is 85 Mrems, little more than in a chest x-ray, in the course of the past four days.

**Situation:** *The incident is over. Reactor remains stable at 280F and cooling, at a pressure of 1,000 psi. The gas bubble, now gone, had never threatened either to provoke a meltdown or a hydrogen explosion, since there was no source or mechanism which could have fed oxygen into the reactor vessel. Had oxygen infiltrated, the amount of hydrogen present would have produced a "blast"—with the force of a hand-swung sledge hammer! That is, there was not even enough hydrogen to threaten an explosion!*

## What press and NRC said

### April 1

President Carter arrives at Three Mile site saying: "The reactor is stable, but I am afraid that in a few days, important decisions will have to be made on the bubble, and Governor Thornburgh may ask you and others in this area to take appropriate action to insure your safety."

*New York Times* reports: "Officials Say Nuclear Plant Is Cooler But Still in Crisis." *Washington Post* reports: "Risk of Explosion at A-Plant Reported Increasing." "Top Priority Is to Collapse Gas Bubble Safely."

NRC Commissioner Denton repeated "precautionary evacuation" theme. He states that the NRC and Metropolitan Edison have an "unequivocal understanding" that the NRC must approve all actions. Denton also contradicts Metropolitan Edison spokesman who reports fact that gas bubble has grown very small. Denton says gas bubble is still major threat. NRC Commissioners Denton and Hendrie both say they are considering a "precautionary evacuation" of residents within 20-mile radius.

### April 2

All gas in the vessel and in the primary coolant system is now gone. Radioactive gas releases into the atmosphere have all but stopped. Reactor is now in a mode to be brought to cold shutdown. Officials study optional procedures for doing so.

**Situation:** *Reactor is held at 280F and 1,000 psi with one primary coolant loop and one steam generator secondary coolant loop operating. This is the condition that exists now (April 10, 1979).*

*New York Times* reports: "Precautionary Evacuation Plan Studied for 25-mile Radius." The *Washington Post* reports: "Reactor Core Is Cooling, But Gas Bubble Is Hazard."

*Daily News* reports: "Key Maneuvers Set at A-Plant." "May Evacuate 600,000 If Move Fails."

NRC Commissioner Denton is quoted as saying the hydrogen content in the reactor vessel has increased "from 1.7 to 2.4 percent. At about 4 percent we reach the danger level and at 8 percent the detonable level."

## Soviets: Western press coverage antinuclear

*The following is a brief excerpt of an article by Anatoly P. Aleksandrov, president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and a nuclear physicist, which appeared in the April 10 issue of the Soviet daily Izvestia. His statement on the Three Mile Island accident included an attack on those Western countries threatening to use military force to obtain scarce oil supplies.*

Coverage by the Western press of the accident at the nuclear reactor in Harrisburg, in which some basically minor unpleasant consequences were described in an extremely exaggerated manner, was an extension of the campaign against atomic power (the development of which) is the only way of avoiding an energy crisis.