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America's Terrorist Nuclear Threat to Itself

By Harvey Wasserman

No sane nation hands to a wartime enemy atomic weapons set to go off within its own homeland, and then lights the fuse.

Yet as the bombs and missiles drop on Afghanistan, the certainty of terror retaliation inside America has turned our 103 nuclear power plants into weapons of apocalyptic destruction, just waiting to be used against us.

One or both planes that crashed into the World Trade Center on September 11, could have easily obliterated the two atomic reactors now operating at Indian Point, about 40 miles up the Hudson.

The catastrophic devastation would have been unfathomable. But those and a hundred other American reactors are still running. Security has been heightened. But all are vulnerable to another sophisticated terror attack aimed at perpetrating the unthinkable.

Indian Point Unit One was shut long ago by public outcry. But Units 2 & 3 have operated since the 1970s. Back then there was talk of requiring reactor containment domes to be strong enough to withstand a jetliner crash. But the biggest jets were far smaller than the ones that fly today. Nor did those early calculations account for the jet fuel whose hellish fire melted the critical steel supports that ultimately brought down the Trade Center.

Had one or both those jets hit one or both the operating reactors at Indian Point, the ensuing cloud of radiation would have dwarfed the ones at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Three Mile Island and Chernobyl.

The intense radioactive heat within today's operating reactors is the hottest anywhere on the planet. So are the hellish levels of radioactivity.

Because Indian Point has operated so long, its accumulated radioactive burden far exceeds that of Chernobyl, which ran only four years before it exploded.

Some believe the WTC jets could have collapsed or breached either of the Indian Point containment domes. But at very least the massive impact and intense jet fuel fire would destroy the human ability to control the plants' functions. Vital cooling systems, backup power generators and communications networks would crumble.

Indeed, Indian Point Unit One was shut because activists warned that its lack of an emergency core cooling system made it an unacceptable risk. The government ultimately agreed.

But today terrorist attacks could destroy those same critical cooling and control systems that are vital to not only the Unit

Two and Three reactor cores, but to the spent fuel pools that sit on site.

The assault would not require a large jet. The safety systems are extremely complex and virtually indefensible. One or more could be wiped out with a wide range of easily deployed small aircraft, ground-based weapons, truck bombs or even chemical/biological assaults aimed at the operating work force. Dozens of US reactors have repeatedly failed even modest security tests over the years. Even heightened wartime standards cannot guarantee protection of the vast, supremely sensitive controls required for reactor safety.

Without continuous monitoring and guaranteed water flow, the thousands of tons of radioactive rods in the cores and the thousands more stored in those fragile pools would rapidly melt into super-hot radioactive balls of lava that would burn into the ground and the water table and, ultimately, the Hudson.

Indeed, a jetcrash like the one on 9/11 or other forms of terrorist assault at Indian Point could yield three infernal fireballs of molten radioactive lava burning through the earth and into the aquifer and the river. Striking water they would blast gigantic billows of horribly radioactive steam into the atmosphere. Prevailing winds from the north and west might initially drive these clouds of mass death downriver into New York City and east into Westchester and Long Island.

But at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, winds ultimately shifted around the compass to irradiate all surrounding areas with the devastating poisons released by the on-going fiery torrent. At Indian Point, thousands of square miles would have been saturated with the most lethal clouds ever created or imagined, depositing relentless genetic poisons that would kill forever.

In nearby communities like Buchanan, Nyack, Monsey and scores more, infants and small children would quickly die en masse. Virtually all pregnant women would spontaneously abort, or ultimately give birth to horribly deformed offspring. Ghastly sores, rashes, ulcerations and burns would afflict the skin of millions. Emphysema, heart attacks, stroke, multiple organ failure, hair loss, nausea, inability to eat or drink or swallow, diarrhea and incontinence, sterility and impotence, asthma, blindness, and more would kill thousands on the spot, and doom hundreds of thousands if not millions. A terrible metallic taste would afflict virtually everyone downwind in New York, New Jersey and New England, a ghoulish curse similar to that endured by the fliers who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, by those living downwind from nuclear bomb tests in the south seas and Nevada, and by victims caught in the downdrafts from Three Mile Island and Chernobyl.

Then comes the abominable wave of cancers, leukemias, lymphomas, tumors and hellish diseases for which new names will have to be invented, and new dimensions of agony will beg description.

Indeed, those who survived the initial wave of radiation would envy those who did not.

Evacuation would be impossible, but thousands would die trying. Bridges and highways would become killing fields for those attempting to escape to destinations that would soon enough become equally deadly as the winds shifted.

Attempts to quench the fires would be futile. At Chernobyl, pilots flying helicopters that dropped boron on the fiery core died in droves. At Indian Point, such missions would be a sure

