

 Submit

To advertise in Features
contact [us](#).

Week of December 19 - 25, 2001
villagevoice.com exclusive

VOICE Giveaways

Film

• Win Passes to
see *BLACK HAWK*
DOWN

[click links to win!](#)

I'll Cut the Fence, You Grab the Plutonium

by **Geoffrey Gray**

or all the difficulty protecting nuclear reactors, safeguarding nuclear weapons facilities has proved no easier. According to a newly released study by the watchdog Project on Government Oversight, terrorists making mock attacks on labs and munitions plants were able to breach security at least 50 percent of the time, even making off once with the goods in a garden cart from Home Depot.

The drills, conducted by the Department of Energy, featured U.S. Special Forces as the enemies. POGO got access to the startling results with the assistance of a dozen whistle-blowers who took part in the exercises.

In one 1997 episode at Los Alamos, a nuclear lab on the floor of a desert canyon in New Mexico, U.S. Special Forces were able to "steal" enough weapons-grade uranium for multiple nuclear warheads.

At Rocky Flats, a major Cold War weapons-production site outside Denver, federal security overseers easily entered a high-security area with a pistol hidden in a coffee can. In another exercise there, Navy SEALs were able to breach the facility by cutting a hole in a chain-link fence. They climbed through, stole a significant amount of plutonium, and ducked back out.

For future drills, Rocky Flats management set new guidelines: SEALs couldn't leave through the fence, but had to climb the guard tower and rope the plutonium over the fence. Instead, the SEALs brought a lacrosse stick, stole the material, then winged it over the fence to allies on the other side.

"The Department of Energy has been too unwilling to deal with its own failure for too long," says Danielle Brian, POGO's executive director. "They never really believed there would be a threat, and they never believed terrorists would be sophisticated. Now we've seen what we're dealing with—and you don't have to be that sophisticated to access these materials."

The report also details the complexes' failure to protect against truck bombs, simulated theft of nuclear secrets, attacks during transport of weapons-grade material, and, at Los Alamos, mock adversaries intent on constructing an "Improvised Nuclear Device"—a quickie bomb.

One problem, the authors note, is that the protective forces at these sites are privately contracted—"fancy rent-a-cops," one expert calls them. POGO recommends positioning small SWAT teams inside the complexes, then consolidating the nuclear materials at more secure facilities, like the underground Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico, and the brand-new, but unused, Device Assembly Facility in Nevada.

These proposals have been on the DOE's table and should be in place by now, the group says, but charges that the budget-plagued department has suffered from poor leadership and has ignored—then hidden—the embarrassing test results. A spokesperson from the DOE's National Nuclear Security division did not return phone calls for comment.

"In a bureaucracy, shit rolls downhill," says Peter Stockton, a special assistant to former secretary of energy Bill Richardson, and a paid consultant to this report. "We spend \$3 billion on securing these places, and the American people expect and believe they are secure. To think that [theft or sabotage] will never happen is horseshit. Nobody thought a rubber boat could sink a warship, and nobody thought two damn planes could sink the World Trade Center."

Related Article:

"[Unsafe at Any Price](#): If Terrorists Take Down Nuclear Plants, You Pay—By the Hundreds of Billions" by Erik Baard

Tell us what you think.
<http://www.villagevoice.com/aboutus/letters.shtml>

[E-mail](#) this story to a friend.