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Nuclear Cover-Up: 49+ Years Old, Going Strong & Killing Us All

Excerpts from an exceptionally lucid speech follow (speech begins 178 lines below this one) given by author and journalist Norman Solomon at UCSC on February 24, 1992 articulating the critical issue of the almost 50-year-old nuclear age and industry and its continuous promotion by official mythologies about the "peaceful atom," about how we are "safe" from the deadly toxicity of high-level and low-level radioactive material, fallout, waste, and contamination of the biosphere, and about how the production and operation of nuclear power plants and the nuclear weapons assembly line—not to mention "temporary" radioactive waste sites—make us "secure."

—ratitor

In the case of nuclear weapons it's certainly the case that the entire technology was born in secrecy. It's been called the nuclear priesthood. We live, in that sense, in a theological society—a theo-political culture that exalts the nuclear priests. We are supposed to defer to them. They have an aura of holiness about them and we are urged in ways, direct or indirect, to defer to their greater wisdom. Presumably when people die in southern Utah because of fall-out, when the Marshall Islanders in the South Pacific die because of the legacies of nuclear testing, when Native American uranium miners die as a result of being sent into the radon ovens of uranium mines in the Southwest, presumably they don't know the "Big Picture." The "Big Picture" is supposed to be the important one, and it comes to us from "on high." That's the kind of theocracy that we're encouraged to make fun of when it happens in a place like Iran, but to defer to when it happens in the United States of America.

We know that one of the charges against the doctors and government officials of the Third Reich brought to trial at Nuremberg was of experimentation on human beings without their voluntary and informed consent. What happened in the concentration camps in effect happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and has happened ever since in the United States and elsewhere as a result of the production, testing and deployment of nuclear weapons. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were selected as targets for the atomic bombs for reasons including the facts that those cities were large enough to show the gradations of effect half a mile, a mile, two miles, five miles and that they hadn't been subjected to major previous so-called conventional bombardment. . .

One of the most logical or illogical inconsistencies of the entire nuclear PR game has to do with the question of nuclear waste. There's all this agonizing and abstract discussion about nuclear waste. If your bathtub were overflowing and you came in the front door and there was water in your living room having run down the steps from the bathroom, you probably would decide that one of the first things you should do is turn off the water. But that's too logical for the nuclear priesthood. Here we have nuclear waste being produced at dozens of nuclear weapons facilities; high-level radioactive plutonium, cesium, strontium, nuclear power plants each producing hundreds of pounds of plutonium every year; many, many pounds of high-level nuclear waste every month, and somehow they can't figure out what to do. They can't figure out that if you don't know what to do with the deadly garbage, that you stop producing it. You know, that would be a logical step. Somehow the waste is out there and the production is here and never the twain shall meet and it's that separation which has been one of the serious flaws in the entire media coverage of nuclear reactors.

In late 1988 and 1989, when anti-nuclear publicity was rampant, you can barely find any stories about the Nevada Test Site. Other facilities are talked about a lot, but the most sacred spot was the test site. It's kind of an axiom of mass media coverage that the more important something is—the more important something is in human terms—the less coverage it should get. So the Nevada Test Site got almost no coverage at all. It's a DOE facility. It's an environmental catastrophe. There's plenty of documentation to that effect, but the Nevada Test Site wasn't talked about because if you shut down the test site you have to shut down the nuclear weapons escalation game. And it's a game that is of course very lucrative. It's a game that the nuclear weapons labs and the contractors and the people in the Pentagon love to play. So the Nevada Test Site is virtually unknown to most people in the United States. . . .

Orwell could never come up with a better phrase than "national security," and that's where we are in 1992. We are told that a nuclear weapons assembly line that is causing cancer and leukemia, causing genetic injury, is there for our national security. The nuclear weapons assembly line dumps scores of deadly, long-lived isotopes into waterways, the air, the soil, and our food, and we're told that those isotopes are part of our national security. . . .

The book *Killing Our Own* and other books such as *Deadly Deceit* document the ways that the cover-ups have been implemented through the national security pseudo-science establishment. When the evidence became too incontrovertible—when the health of the atomic veterans, from the people living downwind of the Nevada Test Site and in the Marshall Islands, from the people living near many of the atomic reactors and waste dumps and nuclear facilities became too obviously damaged to ignore—then the fallback positions were taken. This new awareness had to be given some novocaine. It's kind of like anaesthesia without surgery. That's the response that we get from the media managers and the military planners when there is public awareness. We're told that there's a crisis in our country because the people don't trust the government anymore and that we need to be concerned because people are too skeptical—they don't trust what they hear from Congress, they don't trust what they hear from the executive branch of the US government. But rather than there being not enough trust, there is still too much trust. As people have found who grew up downwind of mushroom clouds believing what they were told, their trust was not only misplaced but very deadly. . . .

People with other perspectives were excluded from mass media coverage even when it was one of the top stories of the year in 1988. There was a front-page article in *The New York Times* by Fox Butterfield, who mentioned a 1970 study that found alarming plutonium levels in the Denver area due to emissions from the Rocky Flats plant. The article jumped over a decade and a half of history— history that was inconvenient. This news article said, "Although the study attracted some attention at the time, only in the last two or three years has public concern about Rocky Flats become widespread in this area as a result of a number of problems." There were tens of thousands of people who went out and protested at the Rocky Flats plant in the late 1970s and '80s. But that didn't count. People sat on the railroad tracks to early block the shipping of material into the Rocky Flats plant. Again, that didn't count as far as *The New York Times* was concerned. The *Times* headlined that front-page article, "Dispute on Waste Poses Threat to Weapons Plant." Two days later Butterfield reported more on this nuclear threat. He wrote in *The New York Times* that Idaho's refusal to accept more of Rocky Flats' nuclear waste "has posed a serious threat to the continued operations of Rocky Flats."

So we're supposed to get the idea, either consciously or otherwise, that first and foremost the plant was threatened. That's where the threat is, it's to the nuclear weapons industry. It's to the profit takers from making more nuclear weapons. That's where the threat is aimed. As for the people who live downstream and downwind from the nuclear facilities—their health and well-being, the threat to their existence—that's secondary. . . .

The New York Times has habitually tried, on this issue of nuclear weapons production, to be dramatic yet reassuring. A front-page headline in December 1988 declared "Wide Threat Seen in Contamination at Nuclear Units." Yet a subheadline incredulously stated that "No effect on humans has yet been found." So of course what the *Times* was doing was regurgitating the very same gibberish that had been fed to them by their official sources. The account was very illogical and contradicted by health studies. . . .

. . . I often think of a statement attributed to the Italian anti-fascist Antonio Gramsci who spoke about what he called the need for "pessimism of the mind and optimism of the will." Sometimes when we talk about these very pressing and real issues we may hear from family, or friends, or acquaintances, or co-workers that we're being cynical. I beg to differ. The real cynicism is to say "I don't want to know." The real cynicism is to say "This doesn't concern me." The real cynicism is to say "Well, gee, the people in power wouldn't do that to us." Which is what people said when they got up at dawn and watched the mushroom cloud and the fallout blow through their communities.

The cynicism that we're fighting is the cynicism of obedience and of trust in institutions and of individuals with authority, and if we're going to challenge cynicism we need to challenge the nuclearized state. We need to challenge the militarized state. We need to challenge the mechanisms of propaganda and social control that in ways large and small are raining down on us just as surely as the fallout fell on the people of the Marshall Islands, southern Utah, and northern Arizona.

This article is excerpted from *The Monthly Planet,* a publication of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze of Santa Cruz County. (Subscriptions are available for $15; add $1.24 tax in Santa Cruz County; add $1.09 tax for subs mailed to other CA addresses.)

Contact: John Govsky c/o *The Monthly Planet*
Address: P.O. Box 8463, Santa Cruz, CA 95061-8463
Voice: 408-429-8755
Fax: : 408-429-8889
Internet: freezecruz@igc.apc.org scfreeze@cruzio.santa-cruz.ca.us
PeaceNet: freezecruz
Cruzio: scfreeze

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Nuclear Cover-Up:

Norman Solomon Blasts Mainstream Media Coverage of Nuclear Issues
Excerpts from a speech by Norman Solomon on February 24, 1992

Norman Solomon is an author, investigative journalist, and a board member of FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), one of the country's most successful and articulate media watch groups. His articles about nuclear weapons, news media, and US-Soviet relations have appeared in dozens of major newspapers and magazines, including *The Nation, The Progressive*, the *Los Angeles Times,* the *Boston Globe,* and the *San Jose Mercury News.* He has appeared on national programs such as ABC's *Good Morning America,* CNN's *Crossfire,* and NPR's *All Things Considered.* During eight visits to Moscow in the Gorbachev era, Solomon has reported for Pacifica Radio National News, Pacific News Service and other American media.

Solomon is co-author of *Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media* (Lyle Stuart, 1990) and *Killing Our Own: The Disaster of America's Experience with Atomic Radiation* (Delacorte Press and Delta Books, 1982). He has also co-authored *The Power of Babble: The Politicians' Dictionary of Buzzwords and Doubletalk for Every Occasion* (soon to be published).

On February 24th, Norman Solomon spoke in Santa Cruz on the news media's coverage of nuclear issues. The following condensed text of his speech was transcribed by Vianne Neblett, and edited by Catherine Banghart, Sara Nisenson, and John Govsky.

Ten years ago I came to the University of California at Santa Cruz campus and spoke about the threat of nuclear weapons and nuclear power plants, the local hazard and the global threat. At the time I was writing in publications like *Nuclear Times,* expressing my concern about what seemed to me to be a hazardously narrow focus of what was then the national Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign. Ten years later many locally based grassroots organizations that grew out of the Nuclear Freeze movement showed that my fears were unjustified. I can't think of a better example than the Santa Cruz Nuclear Weapons Freeze campaign which is making exactly the kind of connections month in and month out in *The Monthly Planet* newspaper that the news media were urging the anti-nuclear movement not to make a decade ago.

When we deal with the implications of nuclear weapons, nuclear power plants and assorted other corporately backed technologies, we're urged to segment the planet, not to look in holistic terms at what is going on.

One of the big dangers of any movement is when we start to take seriously what *Time* and *Newsweek* and the networks say about our movement. I'm afraid this happened in the early and mid-1980s, when the movement against nuclear weapons and nuclear power reached at least a temporary height, and we got a lot of prompting from the mass media to not get too radical; to be careful; to be respectable. We had a burst of publicity in 1988 and 1989 about nuclear weapons production in the United States. Unfortunately we were often successfully encouraged to believe that the mass media of this country had finally come to terms with our legacy of radioactive pollution. What I'd like to do is briefly try to put what happened in late 1988 with the Department of Energy and nuclear weapons scandal in a historical context, then talk a little bit about what happened in the late '80s in the propaganda wars, and what's been happening since then.

In the case of nuclear weapons it's certainly the case that the entire technology was born in secrecy. It's been called the nuclear priesthood. We live, in that sense, in a theological society—a theo-political culture that exalts the nuclear priests. We are supposed to defer to them. They have an aura of holiness about them and we are urged in ways, direct or indirect, to defer to their greater wisdom. Presumably when people die in southern Utah because of fall-out, when the Marshall Islanders in the South Pacific die because of the legacies of nuclear testing, when Native American uranium miners die as a result of being sent into the radon ovens of uranium mines in the Southwest, presumably they don't know the "Big Picture." The "Big Picture" is supposed to be the important one, and it comes to us from "on high." That's the kind of theocracy that we're encouraged to make fun of when it happens in a place like Iran, but to defer to when it happens in the United States of America.

The last time I wrote to the US Department of Energy for a complete official roster of the so-called "Announced United States Nuclear Tests," I found on the list the Trinity test in Alamogordo, New Mexico in the early summer of 1945 which was kept secret at the time. Then the second and third listings of "Announced United States Nuclear Tests" were Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I think that tells us a lot about the psychology of the US government's attitude towards the development and "testing" of nuclear weapons. Because in a real sense what happened in Japan on August 6th and 9th in 1945—the dropping of those two bombs—were in fact tests. That's clear if you look at the historical documentation. It's clear that in fact those cities were chosen for test reasons. And it's chilling because, for one thing, World War II began with a public ethic that one did not drop bombs on civilian populations. In 1939 it would have been pretty much unthinkable that the US government would do such a thing. But after the firebombings of Dresden and Tokyo the US government had acclimated its own citizens to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; to accept the very atrocities, the anti-ethical activities that were to be condemned at Nuremberg.

We know that one of the charges against the doctors and government officials of the Third Reich brought to trial at Nuremberg was of experimentation on human beings without their voluntary and informed consent. What happened in the concentration camps in effect happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and has happened ever since in the United States and elsewhere as a result of the production, testing and deployment of nuclear weapons. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were selected as targets for the atomic bombs for reasons including the facts that those cities were large enough to show the gradations of effect half a mile, a mile, two miles, five miles and that they hadn't been subjected to major previous so-called conventional bombardment. These cities were laboratories that were selected by the planners for the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan. And we often hear in public discussion from government officials that somehow these were not real uses of nuclear weapons. You'll hear that nuclear weapons have never been used in war. It's kind of gone again down the memory hole: forget about it, it's not convenient.

In the late 1940s there were some major decisions to be made about nuclear weapons and it's no coincidence that this happened concurrently with the establishment putting the fix in, so to speak, for the national security nuclear state. In the summer of 1946 there were the first peacetime explosions in history, and one of the main purposes of the tests was to put the American people to sleep about nuclear weapons; to say "Don't worry, you can relax, nuclear weapons will make you secure, they can be aimed in a certain direction." It was an important illusion. And to make matters more convincing, about 42,000 US troops were deployed within a few miles of those atomic explosions.

Later many US Navy personnel were deployed to scrape the radiation off of the ships. Some of the ships, however, were so radioactive that they had to be sunk. And of course this has been a pattern ever since. In the last few years we've heard a lot about the "cleanup" of Department of Energy (DOE) nuclear weapons facilities and these words are presented to us to substitute for reality. We're encouraged to confuse the myth and the real world.

In 1951 the United States expanded the nuclear test program by setting up the Nevada Test Site. It's clear from declassified documents that the government knew that the radiation would be dangerous. There were warnings provided privately by some scientists that people would be at risk, but the US government had some solutions. One was to lie to the American people, and another was to wait until the wind was blowing in the "right direction." In this case it meant the wind would be blowing away from Las Vegas, away from Los Angeles and towards communities in southern Utah, central Nevada, and northern Arizona; communities that housed people in small- and medium-sized towns, rural people who had sheep herds and other livestock.

Diseases began to appear that had never been seen before in those small communities. It's worth recalling that these were primarily Mormon communities. These people didn't smoke cigarettes and they didn't drink alcohol. They didn't have leukemia among their children or among the adult population to speak of, yet in places like Fredonia, Arizona, St. George, Utah, and Railroad Valley, Nevada, children began to be diagnosed with leukemia in the mid-1950s. In the book that I co-authored with Harvey Wasserman titled *Killing Our Own,* we quoted a letter written by a senator from the state of Nevada to the parents of a child who had died of leukemia. The senator said, "You must not believe the Communist scare stories about radioactivity." It was decades later in the late 1970s when Congress finally held some kind of hearings. And as one parent from Nevada who had lost a child testified, "I feel like we—we were treated as guinea pigs, only worse."

So the US government continued to set off atomic bombs in the South Pacific and around the Nevada Test Site. In 1958, when there was a temporary moratorium in the works, the US nuclear testers were eager to set off a bunch of atomic bombs quickly in a row. They were up against their deadline and the weather conditions weren't right, that is, they weren't pointing the radiation with the wind patterns towards those who had been bureaucratically deemed expendable—again echoes from the dock at Nuremberg. But the tests continued and the mushroom clouds rose over Nevada and the fallout blew for hundreds of miles around. It blew, among other places, to Los Angeles. You could say that after 15, 20, 25 years, there's not much that can be done about the initial exposure, which is true. Then you could say so there's no point in going into it, which is not true because early screening even today would be helpful for those people who were born in 1959 in Los Angeles. But then, as now, the US government is not interested in candor, it's not interested in public health. It's interested in furthering its own agenda.

After many hundreds of nuclear tests by the United States and the Soviet Union, which began testing in the late 1940s, there was the Limited Test Ban Treaty. Often John Kennedy is cited for what is really a moving speech at the American University where he discusses the threats to the health of the world from nuclear testing. The speech was very significant because it did reflect a desire of the Kennedy administration to end at least above ground or, as it is sometimes called, atmospheric nuclear testing. But the speech also provides some windows into the limits of that historical period and for every presidency in the nuclear age. Because unfortunately when a president says that "We don't want to go to war" the real translation is "We are planning to go to war." It's like Bertolt Brecht said, "When the government speaks loudest about the need for peace, get ready for the war." In many ways what Kennedy was saying was that it was necessary for the United States to sustain—to continue a situation of dominance. One of the reasons that I think the Limited Test Ban Treaty could be continued to be sold to the military people was that the US would continue to test underground. In fact that's what happened and the arms race continued right on.

While it was a public health victory to ban above-ground nuclear tests with the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, at the same time it was not in any way a disarmament measure. Today, in 1992, the ground still shakes in southern Nevada every time the bombs explode and the arms race lurches forward. The Limited Test Ban Treaty put our consciousness about nuclear weapons underground as well. Meanwhile the nuclear weapons assembly line that had been established in the years after World War II was functioning in high gear and two of the most important institutions for continuing the nuclear arms race were administered by the University of California. That great humanitarian institution of higher learning was committed in the 1950s, as it is in the 1990s, to give its seal of approval and its supposed respectability to an industry that is continually finding better ways to incinerate the planet. It was also a very important move to get companies like General Electric, Westinghouse, Monsanto, and DuPont involved in post-war weapons production and then sanitize it with the Livermore and Los Alamos laboratories being administered by the University of California. In this way it can seem very erudite to figure out what J. Robert Oppenheimer called the "sweet problem" of designing nuclear weapons. Of course that problem never ends because there's always a way to tinker with the design to make a warhead smaller and more compact, giving it more bang for the weight.

In the 1950s they called Hanford, Washington a boomtown. People moved in, housing was built, jobs were plentiful. People went to work and didn't talk to the kids at home in the evenings and weekends about what they did. They were making bombs which were supposed to be normalized and the mass media, as is their usual role, put cosmetics on the corpse, happy-faced stickers on weapons of mass destruction. And so, as industries will do, the nuclear industry kept functioning and needed more PR.

One of the PR tricks had been what Eisenhower had called the "peaceful atom": nuclear power plants. The electrical utilities were not invited in, they were kicked into the nuclear parade through all kinds of bribes and inducements. There was the insurance cap that limited their liability with the government picking up the tab. There were all kinds of subsidies great and small. And there was a tremendous PR machine—the old Atomic Energy Commission, chaired by Dixie Lee Ray in the '60s. She would go in front of the cameras and say, "I would eat plutonium. I'm not worried, you know, these isotopes don't worry me." And of course that's proof positive that patriarchy is culturally caused rather than biologically. So nuclear plants began to be built.

Nuclear issues add an interesting little wrinkle now, in the Democratic presidential campaign. In the primaries for instance, in one of the debates, the national media seemed astonished that the issue of nuclear power was even being brought up. Jerry Brown made some very good points. He challenged this kind of acceptance—this tacit support for nuclear power—from many Democrats and kind of throw-back retrograde support for nuclear power coming from Paul Tsongas. The news media were very surprised. Why do people care about nuclear power? Isn't that passe? If you grew up in the '60s you heard a lot about it and in the '50s, from the outset, it was a rationale. The US government and its PR flacks could always say, "Well, if we're going to have nuclear power it's going to be a peaceful atom." It was a way to tell ourselves that nuclear technology, that fission, wasn't such a bad deal after all. Those myths are still with us. Sometimes I think it's simply a matter of industry officials playing dumb.

One of the most logical or illogical inconsistencies of the entire nuclear PR game has to do with the question of nuclear waste. There's all this agonizing and abstract discussion about nuclear waste. If your bathtub were overflowing and you came in the front door and there was water in your living room having run down the steps from the bathroom, you probably would decide that one of the first things you should do is turn off the water. But that's too logical for the nuclear priesthood.

Here we have nuclear waste being produced at dozens of nuclear weapons facilities; high-level radioactive plutonium, cesium, strontium, nuclear power plants each producing hundreds of pounds of plutonium every year; many, many pounds of high-level nuclear waste every month, and somehow they can't figure out what to do. They can't figure out that if you don't know what to do with the deadly garbage, that you stop producing it. You know, that would be a logical step. Somehow the waste is out there and the production is here and never the twain shall meet and it's that separation which has been one of the serious flaws in the entire media coverage of nuclear reactors.

In late 1988 and 1989, when anti-nuclear publicity was rampant, you can barely find any stories about the Nevada Test Site. Other facilities are talked about a lot, but the most sacred spot was the test site. It's kind of an axiom of mass media coverage that the more important something is—the more important something is in human terms—the less coverage it should get. So the Nevada Test Site got almost no coverage at all. It's a DOE facility. It's an environmental catastrophe. There's plenty of documentation to that effect, but the Nevada Test Site wasn't talked about because if you shut down the test site you have to shut down the nuclear weapons escalation game. And it's a game that is of course very lucrative. It's a game that the nuclear weapons labs and the contractors and the people in the Pentagon love to play. So the Nevada Test Site is virtually unknown to most people in the United States.

A related phenomenon would be the fact that the United States refuses to pledge not to be the first to use nuclear weapons, even today in 1992. These have been called public secrets and this says a lot about how the pseudo-democracy in the United States works. No, it's not secret, just hardly anybody knows about it. So it's a public secret. It's part of the functioning of the propaganda system. Most years a dozen or more nuclear bombs explode under the desert floor in Nevada and most of them are larger than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It goes on and on and the designers have a field day. They can continue to tinker and find nuclear bomb designs that will be part of still more accurate nuclear weapons. Why is accuracy so important and speed so important? Because the faster the delivery of nuclear weapons, the faster and more accurate the attack, the more tempted officials may be to use them in a first strike.

People in the Pentagon have always treasured the option of first strike, that is, the initiation of nuclear war. What a great example of the entire militarists' psychology. We don't make weapons because there are targets that are appropriate; we make weapons and then figure out how to concoct some targets that are then reported to have something to do with this notion of "national security."

Orwell could never come up with a better phrase than "national security," and that's where we are in 1992. We are told that a nuclear weapons assembly line that is causing cancer and leukemia, causing genetic injury, is there for our national security. The nuclear weapons assembly line dumps scores of deadly, long-lived isotopes into waterways, the air, the soil, and our food, and we're told that those isotopes are part of our national security.

It's a major challenge for us to regain the use of language, to talk about security, to discuss the true costs of nuclear weapons, and not only the budgetary costs. We must also insist that the human costs of nuclear technology be discussed. That's where the entire presidential campaign has nothing to say. From Buchanan to Harkin, they don't have much to say about the real issues of nuclear weapons. I know that Tom Harkin has more of an interest in nuclear disarmament than the Bushes and the Buchanans, but I've been listening to all the debates thus far and I don't hear any of the "major" mass media-anointed candidates addressing this issue at all. So it falls back again and again on us to raise these issues and not necessarily in a polite way, in order to build and rebuild a movement; to build on what's been done in the past years so that these issues are real in human terms when they're publicly discussed and when policy decisions get made.

I want to say a little bit about some of the verbal mechanisms and publicity strategies that have been used to diffuse what has been a crisis for the nuclear weapons makers in this country. I'd like to give just a few examples of how the very deep and angry concern of people in this country has been blocked by the news media. I want to be sure to mention that there were at least 300,000 US soldiers exposed to nuclear bomb tests, atmospheric tests at short range between 1945 and 1962. These soldiers have suffered increased incidences of leukemia and cancer. Our book titled *Killing Our Own* documents the situation, and our book was published in 1982 when there was a great deal less evidence than there is today, a decade later. In a sense what we're getting in the fifth decade after the Manhattan Project is a whole first echo of the atomic age coming back.

The book *Killing Our Own* and other books such as *Deadly Deceit* document the ways that the cover-ups have been implemented through the national security pseudo-science establishment. When the evidence became too incontrovertible—when the health of the atomic veterans, from the people living downwind of the Nevada Test Site and in the Marshall Islands, from the people living near many of the atomic reactors and waste dumps and nuclear facilities became too obviously damaged to ignore—then the fallback positions were taken. This new awareness had to be given some novocaine. It's kind of like anaesthesia without surgery. That's the response that we get from the media managers and the military planners when there is public awareness. We're told that there's a crisis in our country because the people don't trust the government anymore and that we need to be concerned because people are too skeptical—they don't trust what they hear from Congress, they don't trust what they hear from the executive branch of the US government. But rather than there being not enough trust, there is still too much trust. As people have found who grew up downwind of mushroom clouds believing what they were told, their trust was not only misplaced but very deadly.

The Soviet Union stopped all nuclear testing for a year and a half in the mid-1980s and beseeched the United States to join in for a permanent ban on nuclear test explosions. The US, to this day, has refused to engage in anything like a moratorium on nuclear tests.

People with other perspectives were excluded from mass media coverage even when it was one of the top stories of the year in 1988. There was a front-page article in *The New York Times* by Fox Butterfield, who mentioned a 1970 study that found alarming plutonium levels in the Denver area due to emissions from the Rocky Flats plant. The article jumped over a decade and a half of history—history that was inconvenient. This news article said, "Although the study attracted some attention at the time, only in the last two or three years has public concern about Rocky Flats become widespread in this area as a result of a number of problems." There were tens of thousands of people who went out and protested at the Rocky Flats plant in the late 1970s and '80s. But that didn't count. People sat on the railroad tracks to block the shipping of material into the Rocky Flats plant. Again, that didn't count as far as *The New York Times* was concerned. The *Times* headlined that front-page article, "Dispute on Waste Poses Threat to Weapons Plant." Two days later Butterfield reported more on this nuclear threat. He wrote in *The New York Times* that Idaho's refusal to accept more of Rocky Flats' nuclear waste "has posed a serious threat to the continued operations of Rocky Flats."

So we're supposed to get the idea, either consciously or otherwise, that first and foremost the plant was threatened. That's where the threat is, it's to the nuclear weapons industry. It's to the profit takers from making more nuclear weapons. That's where the threat is aimed. As for the people who live downstream and downwind from the nuclear facilities—their health and well-being, the threat to their existence—that's secondary.

Now of course any officially orchestrated scandal is incomplete without very high-profile redemption. So the mass media, while beginning to report on the sins of the nuclear bomb makers, seemed very eager to bring tidings of repentance. So in late 1988, *Time* magazine revealed that the DOE "finally seemed bent on reform" and "has taken commendable steps to infuse a safety-conscious attitude in the weapons facilities." It's really easy to turn over a new nuclear leaf. The US government has done it hundreds of times. The idea though that safe nuclear weapons production could be an oxymoron was just too much off the beaten path for the mass media to even entertain. Instead the kind of official self-flagellations were taken at face value. *The Washington Post* front page printed a contrite quote from an undersecretary of the DOE saying, "We have a moral obligation to rectify past sins." *The New York Times* asserted that, "The Energy Department has provided a candid account of its failings." I think it's pretty evident that the strategy for the DOE was to say "yeah we made a mess of things and you're gonna need to give us a bunch more money so we can make things right."

The entire new generation of nuclear weapons production facilities is going to be financed largely with the rationale that the weapons plants have to be cleaned up. What better Orwellian way to do it than to say that for environmental reasons we have to budget a whole lot more money to make nuclear weapons. It makes about as much sense as the rest of the news media that we get.

The New York Times has habitually tried, on this issue of nuclear weapons production, to be dramatic yet reassuring. A front-page headline in December 1988 declared "Wide Threat Seen in Contamination at Nuclear Units." Yet a subheadline incredulously stated that "No effect on humans has yet been found." So of course what the *Times* was doing was regurgitating the very same gibberish that had been fed to them by their official sources. The account was very illogical and contradicted by health studies.

One of my favorite editorials to appear in daily newspapers in this country on the subject of nuclear weapons was printed by *The New York Times* in the period when George Bush was about to move into the White House. The editorial was titled "The Bomb on Mr. Bush's Desk." *The New York Times,* in its wisdom, in its official editorial, urged the incoming President George Bush to "escape catastrophe by moving fast and setting priorities." The "catastrophe" that the *Times* was intent on avoiding was the prospect that the US government's ability to manufacture more nuclear weapons might be impeded by a shortage of tritium. As a matter of fact the *Times* referred to "the operation of the bomb complex" as being a matter of tremendous importance and concluded, "Mr. Bush has only a limited time to avert its collapse." But, as we might have predicted at the time, George Bush in fact knew to quickly avert the collapse and therefore avert what the *Times* referred to as the catastrophe of disarmament.

I was very interested in the term "bomb complex" by the *Times* editorial. They were hell-bent on safeguarding what they called the operation of the "bomb complex" but I don't think they were talking about the psychological mechanisms. They were talking about the literal assembly line. There was a follow-up on the top of page one by a *Times* reporter, Michael R. Gordon, under the headline, "How a Vital Nuclear Material Came to Be in Short Supply." They were banging on the drums, they were getting it together to produce more tritium as soon as possible. And it was interesting to look at all 43 paragraphs of that article. You had exactly one half of one paragraph devoted to any kind of contrary view. I want to read to you how they handled it in the *Times:* "Not everyone is convinced that the shortage of tritium is a national emergency. Some critics of the administration say that the United States could afford dismantling some nuclear weapons to salvage the tritium it needs, but the administration rejects this idea." End of quote. That's all we get to hear about that idea. When Bush got into office, the new DOE Secretary James Watkins was really like the new cleric for the nuclear priesthood. He arrived admitting to sins and promising absolution through pouring more money into the nuclear weapons assembly line. He got tremendous amounts of great press stating that finally he was going to set things straight. Then years later in 1991 the news quietly came out, on the back page with two or three paragraphs, that come hell or high water Watkins was committed to restarting weapons material production facilities at the Savannah River plant, whether or not the environmental regulations were met. So it’s the same old hustle over and over again.

We are, in 1992 more than ever, in a situation where the news media function to put a cloak of murky mystification over events large and small. The corporate control of the media itself is consolidating. There are corporations larger in size and fewer in number that are making a killing off of the media industry. Sometimes they are owned by corporations that are directly involved in contracting to the Pentagon and the nuclear departments of the federal government. One prime example of course is NBC, which is owned by General Electric (GE). When the Gulf War happened in early 1991 Tom Brokaw never told the people watching *NBC Nightly News* that the people signing his paycheck were making a killing, literally and figuratively, off of the Gulf War. GE had sold huge quantities of weapons systems and components to the Pentagon that were then used during the Gulf War.

This process of mystification is one that we have to challenge. We have to strip away the falsehoods, the deceit, and the dangerous ways in which words and images are manipulated to shield us from the realities of control. It’s one of the great paradoxes that the more these corporate forces manipulate and control the mass media, the less those mass media tell us who really controls them and, to a large degree, controls public perception. We, to put it mildly, have a big task ahead of us. I often think of a statement attributed to the Italian anti-fascist Antonio Gramsci who spoke about what he called the need for "pessimism of the mind and optimism of the will." Sometimes when we talk about these very pressing and real issues we may hear from family, or friends, or acquaintances, or co-workers that we’re being cynical. I beg to differ. The real cynicism is to say "I don’t want to know." The real cynicism is to say "This doesn’t concern me." The real cynicism is to say "Well, gee, the people in power wouldn’t do that to us." Which is what people said when they got up at dawn and watched the mushroom cloud and the fallout blow through their communities.

The cynicism that we’re fighting is the cynicism of obedience and of trust in institutions and of individuals with authority, and if we’re going to challenge cynicism we need to challenge the nuclearized state. We need to challenge the militarized state. We need to challenge the mechanisms of propaganda and social control that in ways large and small are raining down on us just as surely as the fallout fell on the people of the Marshall Islands, southern Utah, and northern Arizona. Thanks very much.

—

daveus rattus
yer friendly neighborhood ratman

KOYAANISQATSI

ko.yan.nis.qatsi (from the Hopi Language) n. 1. crazy life. 2. life in turmoil. 3. life out of balance. 4. life disintegrating. 5. a state of life that calls for another way of living.