

One More Thing ...

Still Cause for Concern at TMI

Security Is Better, but Steps Don't Go Far Enough

Scott Portzline

In the summer before the 9-11 attacks, al Qaeda operatives traveled to Three Mile Island on a surveillance mission. This wasn't the first time that al Qaeda moved through our region. In 1993, men associated with terrorist leader Ramsey Yousef trained in Perry County. A few weeks later, the World Trade Center was bombed.

But it was the threat they made to attack nuclear targets, combined with their night time mock assault on an electrical substation during their paramilitary training near New Bloomfield that had me worried about Three Mile Island. On top of that, an intruder had just penetrated the weak defenses at TMI by crashing his car right through the turbine building. He hid for nearly four hours before being captured. It was then that I decided to "go public" with my knowledge of security weaknesses at nuclear power plants. I testified to numerous governmental overseers, hoping to sure-up defenses.

Now, sixteen years later, I would never have dreamed that there are still no requirements to post guards at the entrances of nuclear plants. Is that what we want terrorists to see when they scope out a potential target – an open gate and no guards? The 9-11 mastermind Khalid Shaikh Mohammed originally planned to attack nuclear plants but told a reporter that they had "left out nuclear targets for now."

Equally troubling is the fact that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) deliberately bungled an effort to amend the rules so that entrance guards would be required. More than seven years ago, I filed a petition for rulemaking with the NRC for such a rule. On more than 40 occasions, the NRC failed to adhere to its procedural guidelines and to its principles of openness and clarity, until eventually our proposal had vanished from the new security rulemaking proceedings. The NRC deliberately misled congressional leaders about the status of our entrance guard rule.

There have been many improvements to security at TMI and other nuclear plants. However, weaknesses still exist. The NRC removed a number of weapons which terrorists commonly use from its list of attributes to defend against. They also reduced the size of the postulated vehicle bomb to the amount the industry had proposed. At one nuclear plant, a large truck bomb detonated from a nearby interstate highway could rupture coolant pipes and cause a meltdown.

The NRC's lenient regulatory style for overseeing security is flawed. Licensees are given too much "wiggle room" whereby on paper, security plans become overly optimistic and allow certain scenarios to be brushed under the rug. The NRC must adopt a "directive" regulatory style rather than its current "performance-based" style. This would allow for specific mandates at each site. Instead, we have a regulator that surrendered to industry pressure for generic solutions. The NRC has repeatedly stated that it does not want to be prescriptive.

The new NRC Computer Security Office is charged with cyber situational awareness, analysis and response duties. Here again, the NRC ignored a suggestion from TMI Alert to require licensees to report any "data storm" or network slowdown, whether the cause is understood or



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undetermined, within 30 minutes of its commencement. This would assist with the detection of a rapidly developing coordinated cyber attack.

The NRC has made some rare admissions regarding the destructiveness of aircraft impacts. If notified of an impending attack, licensees are now required to have plans to turn out the lights, shelter certain employees nearby and initiate procedures to maximize specified safety systems' effectiveness to mitigate the consequences. Bottom line – we are still not protected from a 9-11 style attack.

TheBurg welcomes opposing viewpoints.



The cooling towers at Three Mile Island (left), a familiar sight around greater Harrisburg.