

BOOK REVIEWS

Selection of books for review is based on the editors' opinions regarding possible reader interest and on the availability of the book to the editors. Occasional selections may include books on topics somewhat peripheral to the subject matter ordinarily considered acceptable.



Title Perils of the Peaceful Atom—the Myth of Safe Nuclear Power Plants

Authors Richard Curtis and Elizabeth Hogan

Publishers Doubleday & Co., Inc.
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Reviewer David L. Hetrick

It is unusual for *Nuclear Applications and Technology* to publish commentaries on science-fiction books, political propaganda pamphlets, or advertisements for medical quacks. Here is a book combining the most dubious features of all three.

This review is written for several reasons. First, the target of this book is a deliberately created myth that nevertheless bears some superficial resemblance to nuclear energy. Second, the book is a highly skillful piece of propaganda that will possibly attract wide attention, and many men of good will may be misled. Third, at a time when rationality in public policy is most urgent, this book may make any rational public discussion of nuclear safety extremely difficult.

The authors have used a clever blend of emotionalism, distortion, appeals to dubious authority, and innuendo. Begin with the table of contents. The foreword is entitled "In Defense of Fear." Chapter I is

"The Goose that Laid the Radioactive Egg." Chapter II is "Those Who Favor Fire." Chapter III is "Thresholds of Agony." A few other chapter titles are "Nuclear Roulette," "Don't Bother Running," "The Thousand-Year Curse," and "Closing the Responsibility Gap." Get the idea?

Now savor this description of affairs at the Fermi reactor site, following "...an event as close to Armageddon as this country has ever known":

"For the next month technicians and experts tiptoed around Fermi and spoke of its ailment in whispers, like aborigines camped on the slope of a volcano, fearful of provoking the earth god's wrath."

The authors admit, somewhat grudgingly, that there may be certain differences between a reactor and an atomic bomb. But the point is soon buried in an emotional avalanche typified by "...enough nuclear material to flatten dozens of Hiroshimas" and "...effects as devastating as a multimegaton weapon."

The book is full of quotations. The reasonable remarks of qualified people are mostly in reference to some other subject. A speech by Glenn Seaborg was cut apart and rearranged, creating a completely wrong impression. Many of the more sensational remarks are by unqualified people, while the most shocking and convincing quotations come from that great friend of the propagandist, the ubiquitous but unidentified expert. Consider the misgivings "felt by many highly trained, skilled, experienced men intimately associated with

nuclear power..." Another example is:

"Many of these individuals have indicated that the proliferation of atomic power plants and related facilities represents a threat to human welfare meriting comparison with that of nuclear war."

More metaphorically:

"These persons point to visible and widening cracks in the structure of the nationwide atomic power edifice."

More frightening:

"They also point out the tendency of nuclear power advocates to minimize the possibility of a major nuclear plant accident... and some of these experts have been forced to admit that *we can destroy ourselves without a war (sic)*, simply by mismanaging peaceful nuclear power."

The closing paragraph of the foreword contains a disclaimer:

"It is our hope, then, that this book will not be viewed as an irresponsible attack on the atomic energy establishment or the nuclear industry..."

This expression of hope is not likely to mislead anyone. The direction of the attack is clear, and the phrases, picked at random from the text, are well calculated: "recklessness, callousness and ineptitude," "incredible omissions," "infantile logic," and "miscalculations, negligence, complacency, haste, and irresponsibility."

One wishes that this could all be dismissed as a tasteless horror

comic book. It is funny in places; for example, in reference to the SL-1: "...the bottom of the reactor vessel should have been inspected for boron, a material which adds substantially to reactivity in the core." Also, one may smile about the fish "...found many miles downstream from the lake glowing like Christmas trees." But how many non-technical people will recognize the humor? The general reader is much more likely to be gravely misled than amused.

Why was this book written? It is difficult to say. The style is that of a grand crusade, and the message is

that *you*, dear reader, had better wake up and write to your congressman to stop nuclear power before it is too late.

This book is required reading for technical people, not only because it is a grave insult to a large body of the technical community, but also because it is an excellent example of what a frightened, ignorant writer (or a deliberately subverted writer) can do with the skills of modern propaganda.

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