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Ho-hum - another nuclear outrage

by Walt Patterson

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Mid-afternoon, Monday 8 June 1981: the phone rings at the Patterson establishment. It is BBC Newsnight: Israel has just bombed Iraq's nuclear centre. Do I clutch my head and exclaim in horror? I do not. Instead, it is not until the following day that I realise that everyone else thinks it is a major news story. From me it elicits merely a shrug of the shoulders: "Of course Israel has bombed Iraq's nuclear centre - what else did you expect?"

Since the mid-1970s I have been one of a small handful of people in the UK trying - with depressing lack of success - to awaken public concern about much the most serious problem of civil nuclear technology: its unbreakable link with nuclear weapons. In August 1974 I was making preparations to write my Penguin book *Nuclear Power*; and I recall vividly remarking to my wife "Well, I am gradually getting up to here in nuclear material; the only thing I don't want to know about is nuclear weapons". Within three months, writing the book, I was up to here in nuclear weapons; and I have been that way ever since. It is impossible to talk about civil nuclear technology without tripping time and again over nuclear weapons. Since the mid-1970s it has been obvious to me that the weapons link is far and away the gravest problem posed by the development and use of civil nuclear technology.

Why, then, does it rank so low in the hierarchy of nuclear issues about which the British public are prepared to raise their voices? I wish I knew. People fume and fulminate about the transport of spent fuel through towns, or against the discharge of dilute radioactivity into coastal waters, or against the drilling of test bores to gather geological data to assist in planning for disposal of nuclear waste. Why are "antinuclear" campaigners - those opposed to civil nuclear activities - so ready to raise a public outcry over such comparatively ordinary problems, common to many industrial activities beside nuclear, while ignoring the one problem which is unique to nuclear technology, and beside which all other civil nuclear problems pale?

In January 1975, two Windscale workers died within 24 hours of each other. As a result of the ensuing uproar, British Nuclear Fuels Limited (BNFL) held the first press visit to Windscale for thirteen years. At the press conference most of the questions, understandably, addressed matters of radiological safety. But I asked whether it was true that BNFL was supplying separated plutonium - potential nuclear weapons material - to countries which were not party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty - a Treaty of which the UK is one of the three sponsoring nations, together with the US and the USSR. Dr Norman Franklin, then BNFL's Chief Executive, declined to answer, saying that such questions should be directed to the Government, who were responsible for such policy decisions.

Of course, I knew that the answer to my question was "yes": BNFL, and the UKAEA before it, had been delivering plutonium to both Japan and Italy - neither at that time a party to the NPT - and possibly also to Spain, which in June 1981 is still not a party. The first five-year review conference of the NPT was scheduled to take place in May 1975; and Friends of the Earth (FoE) drew attention to the anomaly of having a sponsoring country itself in contravention, if not of the letter of the Treaty, then certainly of its spirit. But the UK Government duly issued a complacent denial that it was in breach of the Treaty, and the issue sank without trace.

From that time onwards, as FoE struggled to attract attention to BNFL's plans to expand reprocessing at Windscale, one of the main foci of our concern was the effect such a development would have on the spread of international nuclear weapons capability. If the UK, with its coal, gas and oil, could claim to need to use plutonium as a commercial fuel, how could we question similar claims by Pakistan, India, Argentina, Brazil - or anyone else? But this crucial FoE argument received scarcely a murmur of comment, either in media reportage on the Windscale Inquiry or in the official report by Mr Justice Roger Parker. The chapter of the Parker Report which deals with the weapons implications of the Windscale plan is outrageous nonsense. It dredges up futile and discredited BNFL arguments about pre-irradiation of fresh plutonium fuel and other similar technical fixes with no hope of credibility, much less of effectiveness, and endorses them. It even misrepresents UK obligations under the NPT. But in the UK only a few stubborn diehards like your correspondent have taken the trouble to challenge this dangerous self-delusion on the part of our nuclear decision makers.

It is of course true that the top nuclear experts from some sixty countries, the UK included, last year completed the International Nuclear Fuel Cycle Evaluation. In February 1980 they published a report which declared that there was no significant difference between civil nuclear technologies: they all increased the risk of the spread of nuclear weapons. Needless to say, the conclusion these experts drew was that they ought therefore to go on and do what they intended to do. Others draw a quite different conclusion. My old FOE colleague and friend Amory Lovins and his wife have just published a book-length study of the problem, entitled **Energy/War: Breaking the Nuclear Link**.

The Lovinses argue that if every so-called civil nuclear technology aggravates the problem of controlling nuclear weapons, the only appropriate policy is to phase out so-called civil nuclear technology, as fast as possible; and they describe a way to do just that. However, their book has not to my knowledge been reviewed thus far even once in the UK. In the UK the weapons link is still considered a non-problem.

On 7 June 1981 Israeli jets registered 4 x 2000lbs of TNT-worth of non-confidence in the international regime for the control of civil nuclear technology. The International Atomic Energy Agency interpreted the raid, correctly, as an attack on the IAEA's so-called "safeguards": Iraq is, after all, a party to the NPT and has complied with all the requirements of this safeguard's regime. Israel is not a party to the NPT; the Israeli nuclear installation at Dimona is top secret and off limits to nearly all Israelis, to say nothing of the international nuclear community. The day after the Israeli raid, Colonel Gadafy of Libya declared that it was now time for the Arab countries to attack and destroy the installation at Dimona; and I again shrugged my shoulders. Of course he did - what else would you expect?

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