PALISADES’ AND ENTERGY’S CHRONIC SECURITY FAILURES

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The Palisades atomic reactor, on the Lake Michigan shore in southwest MI, has suffered a long line of security failures, under its previous owner (Consumers Energy, 1971 to 2007), and its current owner, Entergy (2007 to the present). This is all the more alarming, considering it sits on the Lake Michigan shoreline, next to the drinking water supply for Chicago, about 80 miles away, and many millions more people downstream.

A month ago, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) issued a Confirmatory Order, documenting commitments agreed to by Entergy under "Alternative Dispute Resolution" with the agency, stemming from a security transgression on Christmas Eve, 2012, two years earlier. Palisades' security manager ordered a security supervisor to take a weapon, and go out on patrol, to cover for another security supervisor who wanted to take time off for the holiday. The problem was, this violated both NRC regulations, and Entergy's own security codes. The replacement supervisor had not completed training required to qualify him for that duty. After an investigation, the NRC concluded the regulatory violation was willful on the part of both the security manager and the unqualified replacement supervisor.

According to NRC’s Confirmatory Order, Entergy's commitments become legally binding on August 22nd. They include both Palisades-specific, and Entergy fleet-wide reviews of security qualifications and job descriptions, and associated re-training. However, this one incident is but the tip of the iceberg. Both Palisades in particular, and Entergy in general, have suffered a long history of security failures, despite the final warning delivered by the 9/11 attacks 13 years ago now.

It took security guard whistleblowers at Palisades to bring Entergy's Christmas Eve, 2012 willful violation to light -- at the cost of their jobs. But those very same whistleblowers have warned that there have been many other violations of security regulations going on at Palisades. However, the work environment in the security department at Palisades remains “chilled,” the “safety culture” remains broken, so guards and even supervisors are fearful that raising safety and security concerns could well get them harassed, retaliated against, and even fired. In fact, two security supervisors, and another security guard, have been fired for doing their job: calling attention to safety and security problems. They spoke out at NRC's June 26, 2014 annual performance public meeting near Palisades, NRC's Confirmatory Order, and Entergy's commitments agreed to therein, were supposed to begin to address this chilled work environment and broken safety culture, but that remains to be seen: the fired supervisors and security guard have not had their jobs restored; the widely distrusted manager who fired them got promoted; and Entergy Palisades has suffered a broken safety culture for years now, again, only revealed to the public thanks to the courage of Palisades whistleblowers sticking their necks out.

Such security problems are more than a decade old, and afflict nuclear power plants nationwide. The Project on Government Oversight issued a major report on commercial nuclear industry security failures and vulnerabilities on the one-year mark after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. A major focus of the report was security failures at Entergy's twin reactor Indian Point nuclear power plant, precariously close to
New York City. Despite the devastating terrorist attacks on the city itself, Indian Point's vulnerabilities remained, a full year later.

In fact, Entergy's security failures and violations would persist at Indian Point for many years, revealed by further whistleblower revelations and allegations, as well as filmmakers, such as Rory Kennedy, in her HBO documentary "Indian Point: Imaging the Unimaginable." It is about the risk of a terrorist attack at Indian Point. She interviews her brother, Bobbie Kennedy, Jr. of Hudson Riverkeeper, in a helicopter, hovering over Indian Point for a half-hour before the plant even bothered to radio them to see who they were, and what they were doing.

Such security vulnerabilities persist. At a New York City event in October, 2013, additional documentary film footage was premiered, showing that Indian Point not only remained vulnerable to aerial attack, but also that it was unguarded against water-borne attacks emanating from the Hudson River. As reported by Beyond Nuclear board member and investigative journalist Karl Grossman:

"...a segment of a new video documentary on nuclear power by Adam Salkin was screened. It showed Salkin in a boat going right in front of the Indian Point plants and it taking nearly five hours for a 'security' boat from the plant to respond, and Salkin, the next day, in an airplane flying as low as 500 feet above the plants. The segment demonstrated that the nuclear plants on the Hudson are an easy target for terrorists and, it noted, what it showed was what 'terrorists already know.'"

This, despite the fact that the 9/11 Commission Report had documented that Al Qaeda had considered attacking Indian Point, and other nuclear power plants, but decided not to. For now, that is -- lest things get out of hand, reported an Al Jazeera reporter in a Spanish newspaper on the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, after he had interviewed Al Qaeda leaders Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi bin al-Shibh. (Both were later captured, tortured, and ultimately imprisoned at Guantanamo.) Thus, Indian Point's, and other nuclear power plants', security has rested on the supposed “moral restraint” (or strategic decisions, or fear of the American response) of Al Qaeda, a truly fearful proposition.

In September 2004, Dr. Edwin Lyman, Senior Scientist in the Union of Concerned Scientists’ Global Security Program, authored a study, commissioned by Riverkeeper, Chernobyl on the Hudson? The Health and Economic Impacts of a Terrorist Attack at the Indian Point Nuclear Plant. Those impacts would be catastrophic:

“We find that, depending on the weather conditions, an attack could result in as many as 44,000 near-term deaths from acute radiation syndrome or as many as 518,000 long-term deaths from cancer among individuals within fifty miles of the plant. These findings confirm that Indian Point poses a severe threat to the entire New York metropolitan area.” (Executive Summary, page 4)

Dr. Lyman added “The economic damages within 100 miles would exceed $1.1 trillion…and could be as great as $2.1 trillion…Millions of people would require permanent relocation.”

Over 20 million people live or work within a 50-mile radius of Entergy’s Indian Point nuclear power plant.

Echoing POGO’s 2002 revelations, security breaches were documented at Palisades around the very same time (Palisades was still owned by Consumers Energy in 2002). As documented in a watchdog report (at page 8 of 45), the Kalamazoo Gazette had reported the penetration of Palisades’ premises by three suspicious cars, on the very eve of the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks ("Palisades incident leads to reassessment," Oct. 3, 2002). Palisades’ security guard force phoned the wrong local law enforcement, leading to a 45-minute delay in response. By the time law enforcement officers arrived, the three suspicious cars were long gone.

On October 20, 2002 the New York Times reported ("Guards at Nuclear Plants Say They Feel Swamped by a Deluge of Overtime") the nervous breakdown of an armed security guard at Palisades, who had
authorization to go, unescorted, anywhere in the nuclear power plant. She had been forced by Consumers Energy to work 72-hour work weeks, week after week, month after month, for nearly a year. As POGO documented in the report above, nuclear utilities such as Entergy chose to work their security guards to the breaking point, after 9/11, rather than hire additional personnel. Why? To save money by not having to train new security guards, as well as not having to provide additional guards’ benefits.

This kind of abuse continues at Palisades, according to recent revelations by security guard whistleblowers. On a tour of Palisades conducted by Entergy on June 11th, Beyond Nuclear's Kevin Kamps asked Entergy's Palisades Site Vice President, Tony Vitale, a direct question about the fatigue of security guards forced to repeatedly work long hours. He replied that Palisades was in full compliance with NRC regulations limiting security guards' work hours, to prevent fatigue. It turns out, according to whistleblowers, that Entergy is actually circumventing those very regulations, by pressuring security guards to sign waivers, under fear of harassment, retaliation, or termination -- the polar opposite of a "safety culture" in the nuclear security department, and despite Vitale’s explicit assurances to the contrary.

Another major security breach at Palisades was documented by Tom Junod, writing in Esquire magazine. His June 2007 article, entitled "Mercenary," revealed that the chief of security at Palisades was a fraud. He had faked his security credentials and clearances. He had fooled not only Consumers Energy, which hired him, but also Entergy, which retained him. He had buffałoed not only the Van Buren Country Sheriff's Dept. and MI State Police, but also the NRC, FBI, and Department of Homeland Security. He had convinced them all that his "Viper Squad" concept was the model that should be applied in nuclear power plant security departments nationwide. Little did the government agencies, which brought him into Washington, D.C. to give a briefing on the concept, realize that he was a failed screenwriter, who made a living by cleaning chimneys. His SWAT-team-like concepts were likely a recycled script from one of his failed screenplays.

What's perhaps most frightening of all, William Clark, nom du guerre "Zeke" the Mercenary, claimed to be a professional assassin, a one-man death squad, who had "served" shadowy U.S. government agencies in a dozen or more combat zones overseas, including Iraq. Clark's aberrant behavior while at Palisades -- such as keeping an arsenal of weaponry at his nearby home -- apparently raised no red flags at the nuclear utility, nor government agencies. This, despite the fact that Palisades is immediately flanked by a state park to the north, and a resort community to the south, putting a large number of people at immediate risk from aberrant security guard force behavior at Palisades, especially from the security guard force chief. “Zeke” resigned his post immediately upon the exposé in Esquire.

That particular recipe for disaster could get even worse, if a bill pending in the MI state legislature becomes law. It would grant immunity to Entergy if Palisades’ security guards use lethal force. While signs on the beach warn that use of lethal force is authorized at Palisades, the buoys on Lake Michigan marking the Palisades no-go zone have no signage whatsoever. The State of MI has created a recreation water trail along the lakeshore, encouraging kayakers to travel it. Thus, boaters, canoeists, and kayakers could pull up on the beach at Palisades, not knowing they are entering a zone where lethal force is authorized. This makes the security incident at the top of this entry -- a person unqualified to use a firearm sent out on patrol -- all the more frightening.

The bill's sponsor, State Representative Al Pscholka (R-Stevensville) seems to have some twisted motivations. As quoted by Michigan Radio, he seems less concerned about terrorists, than about environmental protestors.

The NRC, the mandate of which is supposedly to protect public safety and security, is apparently unconcerned about such risks, voicing its support for the bill.

Beyond Nuclear has protested this assault on civil liberties. It has organized rallies at the Van Buren State Park to Palisades’ immediate north, as well as at the atomic reactor’s front entrance, as have others before.
it. Such basic constitutional rights, such as to assemble and peacefully protest, should be protected, not threatened with the use of lethal force.