

WASHINGTON TIMES
18 December 1986

U.S. studying risks of nuclear terrorism

By Ted Agres
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The FBI and CIA are conducting a top-secret study to assess the risks posed by terrorists obtaining nuclear weapons. The Washington Times has learned.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which oversees commercial nuclear power reactors in the United States, requested the study this year. According to knowledgeable sources, the commission is particularly concerned that nuclear power plants may be vulnerable to explosives-laden truck bombs, similar to those used in the Middle East.

While damage to a nuclear power plant would be nowhere as catastrophic as detonation of a nuclear weapon, there could be great damage from the spread of radiation, similar to the aftermath of the explosion at the Chernobyl reactor in the Soviet Union.

Part of the intelligence report, sources said, will focus on identifying which domestic and international groups would be most likely and most capable of engaging in nuclear or nuclear-related acts of terrorism.

As a senior FBI official involved in counterterrorism policy warned, "If some terrorist group seized a nuclear facility, obviously there would be a tremendous amount of hysteria created, regardless of how it was handled."

Some experts already have identified specific domestic terrorist groups as having the capability and possible motivation to seek nuclear materials or weapons.

Bruce Hoffman, an analyst at the Rand Corp., reports in a study sponsored by the Energy Department that Islamic terrorists, especially if backed by Iran or Libya, might attack a U.S. facility to acquire material to make a bomb or to obtain an assembled weapon.

In this country, left-wing terrorists might target a nuclear facility "to make a point" of the dangers associated with them, Mr. Hoffman states. And right-wing terrorists, such as the neo-Nazi white supremacists, might seek to acquire nuclear capability to "hasten Armageddon" or to bomb Israel or attack the U.S. government.

Robert Kupperman, a terrorism analyst at the Center for Strategic

and International Studies, disagreed with this analysis. "If terrorists wanted to engage in mass destruction, why wouldn't they go with biological weapons" that are far easier to obtain and use?

That, however, is a different sort of worry.

The threat or actual release of radioactive material into the environment or the threat of a deliberate nuclear accident, such as a core meltdown, could be attractive to some terrorists, according to Paul Leventhal, president of the Nuclear Control Institute. Security at commercial facilities traditionally has not been as tight as that at military sites.

"Nuclear power plants could be vulnerable if terrorists succeed in entry or in detonating a truck bomb at a perimeter fence or elsewhere on the site," he said.

The utilities that operate these commercial facilities have been reluctant to install expensive security measures whose costs probably would be passed on to consumers, assuming approval by public rate commissions.

Elizabeth Ten Eyck, deputy director of the NRC's Division of Safeguards, said the agency has been studying security problems at commercial plants for some time, especially involving the threat from truck bombs. She said studies have been done of the various nuclear sites to determine the vulnerabilities of each, but would not elaborate.

The most frightening prospect, however, is that of terrorists obtaining a nuclear weapon or sufficient plutonium to construct a crude nuclear device.

A nuclear weapon in such hands, many experts believe, would be the ultimate nightmare. Depending on the motivations of the terrorists, they could effectively hold an entire city — and possibly a nation and its government — hostage to their demands.

As Energy Secretary John Herrington, whose department runs the nation's nuclear weapons production facilities, told The Times: "If we can't run top security in this, the whole [nuclear weapons] program is going to be jeopardized."

Most authorities still believe the likelihood of nuclear terrorism occurring in the United States remains slim. There is no evidence that a ter-

rorist group has already obtained nuclear capability or is about to do so.

But many experts also believe that this may be changing, as terrorist acts overseas are increasing and becoming more deadly.

Terrorists also are becoming more technically sophisticated. Some experts believe that a handful of terrorists, with the assistance of a few knowledgeable scientists or especially with help from a foreign government, might construct a nuclear bomb with a relatively small amount of suitable fissionable material either stolen or purchased on the black market.

Some experts debate whether terrorists could ever have the know-how to steal or make a nuclear device. But the government doesn't like to take chances. The Department of Energy, which runs the nation's nuclear weapons research, development and fabrication facilities,

spends \$750 million a year on safeguards and security.

One part of the problem is the number and variety of nuclear facilities. These include nearly 60 sites under DOE jurisdiction, some 18 of which are directly involved in research, construction and testing of nuclear weapons.

The Energy Department is responsible for producing nuclear weapons for the military. Bomb components are designed and manufactured at these 18 facilities across the country. The parts are shipped to DOE's Pantex Plant in Amarillo, Texas, where they are assembled. The completed bombs then are delivered to the military for deployment in the United States and abroad.

The DOE plants are operated under contract by private companies. In almost all cases, the guard forces also are provided by private firms. These facilities, according to experts, are prime targets for terrorists seeking nuclear weapons or material.

In response, the Energy Department last year embarked on a crash, multi-million dollar program to upgrade safeguards and security at the weapons facilities. It's called Operation Cerberus, after the mythological three-headed creature that guarded the gates of hell.

About a third of the department's 94 recommendations already have been carried out. Some of the others are under way and still others are in the budgetary pipeline for future fiscal years.

"I think we are making amazing progress," DOE's Mr. Herrington said. "I'm satisfied that we're doing the job."