

PM: The Illusion of Safety

By Polly Mann

How the book ended up on my coffee table is a mystery. I don't remember ordering it and the density and complexity of the material is such that I would never pick it up off the shelves of a bookstore to even peruse. Yet, I'm glad I read it. Eric Schlosser's *Command and Control*, subtitled, *Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident and the Illusion of Safety* (Penguin Press, 2013) should be read by all literate Americans and its message acted upon. It convinced me, as nothing else I have ever read, of the need to eliminate all nuclear weapons and, if necessary, engage in a campaign urging all the nations of the world to do likewise. It tells the story of the fatal and could-have-been fatal accidents involved with nuclear weapons, either in silos or being transported, and the personal stories of the individuals responsible for the safety of the missiles.

The numbers of fatal accidents appear to be far greater than I could have imagined, but who knows the full extent? To date the complete count is unknown.

The victims have been military and civilian and mostly young.

Simple accidents such as dropping a wrench or failing to pull a switch could produce disastrous results. For example, at a reactor in Virginia, a worker cleaning the floor of a reactor got "his shirt caught on the handle of a circuit breaker on the wall. He pulled the shirt off it, tripped the circuit breaker, and shut down the reactor for four days." In another incident: "A lightbulb slipped out of the hand of a worker at a reactor in California. The bulb hit the control panel, caused a short circuit, turned off sensors, and made the temperature of the core change so rapidly that a meltdown could have occurred."

My favorite nuclear acronym is MANIAC which stands for "Mathematical Analyzer, Numerical Integrator, and Computer," an early electronic, digital computer used at Los Alamos to help design the first hydrogen bombs." LOX which ordinarily one might have thought had a relationship with cream cheese and salmon, refers to "liquid oxygen, a propellant that was used as an oxidizer, in combination with rocket fuel to launch Atlas and Titan 1 missiles." To protect themselves against deadly radiation any military in direct contact with missiles, the crew wore RHFCO suits a liquid-proof, vapor-proof, outfit with an air pack and a bubble helmet that looked like a space suit, commonly known among Titan crews as a "ref-co."

The most dramatic and compelling story is about an accident that occurred in 1979 at a missile site near Damascus, Arkansas, necessitating the evacuation of the population in a large surrounding area. The system's warning of an eminent Russian Attack had been compromised by a technician's misplacement of a tape in a computer at NORAD (North American Air Defense Command created in 1958 by the United States and Canada to defend against a Soviet attack). The Damascus incident

had all the components of a mystery drama but without a happy ending. The two enlisted men who were the heroes of the near catastrophe—Jeff Kennedy and David Livingston—were never actually recognized as such. (Livingston died of radiation poison. Kennedy sued Martin-Marietta corporation, received a small sum and never reenlisted in the Air Corps.) A couple of months after the incident 27 security officers “protecting the nerve center of America's command-and-control system” were stripped of their security clearances for using LSD, marijuana, cocaine, and amphetamines.”

In his closing comments, Command and Control's author, Eric Schlosser, states that through the Freedom of Information Act he was furnished a 245-page document that listed the “Accidents and Incidents Involving Nuclear Weapons” from the summer of 1957 until the spring of 1967.

As of today the U.S. has approximately 4,650 nuclear weapons. In 1996, the United States became the first country to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and since then more than 180 other nations have also signed it. But in 1999 the Senate refused to ratify it. The U.S. now plans to spend as much as \$180 billion over the next 20 years to maintain its nuclear weapons, run its weapons laboratories, and upgrade its uranium-processing facilities.

As a reader of this book I have to conclude that the safeguarding and protection of this country is tied to the country's wealth, not its people. Today a record-breaking 46.5 million American people live in poverty and the U.S. has the highest rate of childhood poverty in the world. Why should U.S. citizens be paying billions for nuclear weapons which can endanger lives, while at the same time so many people go without adequate food, housing and medical care? So my conclusion about the above is WHY? WHY DO WE TOLERATE NUCLEAR EXPENDITURES AT THE COST OF HUMAN WELL-BEING? WHY?

Polly Mann is a co-founder of Women Against Military Madness and a regular contributor and columnist for the WAMM newsletter.