



## Indian Point: Disaster Awaits



EDITORIALS

In a city forever stunned and horribly awakened by the terrorist attack of Sept. 11, there ought to be a new awareness of the ways in which unexpected and “impossible” events can—and do—happen. This is why every New Yorker, provided with the facts, must conclude that the Indian Point 2 and Indian Point 3 nuclear reactors, located just 30 miles north of Manhattan, must be shut down immediately. A meltdown or terrorist attack at Indian Point—both of which are well within the realm of the probable, according to experts—would make Sept. 11 look like a minor tragedy. Twenty million people—including every resident of New York City and

those living in Westchester, Orange, Rockland, Putnam, Bergen and Fairfield counties—would have their lives endangered, followed by years of widespread cancer from radiation.

Even before Sept. 11, Indian Point was a Chernobyl in the making, with the worst safety record among the country’s 103 nuclear reactors. And as The New York Times’ Bob Herbert pointed out in a recent series of columns about Indian Point, American soldiers found diagrams of U.S. nuclear plants when they searched caves in Afghanistan. Mr. Herbert also noted that nuclear reactors were not built to withstand the impact of a commercial airliner, and that American Airlines Flight 11 flew over Indian Point on its way toward the World Trade Center.

Previously and wrongly seen as a “suburban” issue, Indian Point is a catastrophe waiting to happen. City, state and federal officials—including Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Governor George Pataki, and Senators Charles Schumer and Hillary Clinton—bear full responsibility for averting this disaster now; to do any less is to risk the lives and well-being of those who elected them. They must spend whatever political capital they have and apply public and private pressure on the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which has final say over the reactors. If President George Bush is truly concerned for the safety of New Yorkers, who have already lost so many to terrorism, he will immediately call for Indian Point to be shut down.

Indian Point is owned by the \$10 billion New Orleans-based Entergy Corporation,

which bought the two reactors from the New York State Power Authority and Con Edison for about \$1.1 billion in 2000 and 2001. Entergy plans to run the reactors until their licenses run out in 2013 and 2025. Indian Point has been good to Entergy: A company press release states that for the fourth quarter of 2001, "Entergy Nuclear earned \$28.9 million, or 13 cents per share, compared to \$19.1 million, or 9 cents per share, in fourth quarter 2000. The increase was due primarily to increased revenue resulting from the contribution for the full quarter in 2001 of the Indian Point 2 and Indian Point 3 nuclear units in Buchanan, N.Y., and FitzPatrick nuclear unit in Lycoming, N.Y."

Entergy's chief executive, J. Wayne Leonard, and its board of directors are naturally averse to taking the billion-dollar write-down they would have to absorb if they closed the plant. But that would be far less expensive than the cost of a nuclear meltdown, which would put Entergy out of business and put an end to Mr. Leonard's career.

What are the arguments against mothballing Indian Point? The plant provides 7 to 8 percent of the electricity consumed in the state and is a significant power source for the city. But shutting it down would not affect the quality of New Yorkers' lives in any lasting way. The grid of power plants in New England and the lower Hudson Valley, all of which run on coal, would take over. There would be some risk of minor summertime power shortages—including the possibility of sporadic brown-outs—and a 20 percent rise in electric bills, according to *The Times*. This would be a small price to pay in exchange for knowing that New York would no longer be 30 miles downwind of a profoundly unsafe, poorly managed terrorist target filled with radioactive fuel. And by 2004, several non-nuclear power plants now being built will be able to replace all the power, and then some, currently being generated by Indian Point. Nuclear plants do, of course, create less air pollution than other power sources, though that argument collapses when weighed against the fatally toxic pollution that would be released in the event of an attack or accident.

Is an accident likely? N.R.C. spokeswoman Diane Screnci told *The Times'* Mr. Herbert that the commission categorizes a reactor's safety by the colors green, white, yellow and red, with green being the safest, red the least safe. She told him that Indian Point 2 is "currently the only plant with a red finding." In other words, it's the most dangerous nuclear plant in the United States. In 2000, an accident at the plant released 20,000 gallons of radioactive water into a less secure area of the reactor, and the reactor was closed for a year. Last December, the reactor automatically shut down after an unexpected electrical malfunction. And it's hardly comforting to learn that four of the plant's seven control-room crews flunked their annual qualification exams last year when they failed to react properly in accident drills. In one test, the workers took 25 minutes to realize that a valve they thought was open was actually closed. Rather than being fired, the crews were given remedial training.

Entergy executives are blasé about the dangers (perhaps because they live in New Orleans); a company spokesman says that any opposition to the plant is a “political stunt.” Apparently they’ve never read the 1982 N.R.C. study which reported that a meltdown at Indian Point 2 could kill 46,000 people immediately and injure 141,000. Entergy’s evacuation plan, which Governor Pataki approved in a severe lapse of judgment, is a joke; it applies to just a 10-mile radius of the plant. The inability to safely evacuate the much larger vulnerable zone of 50 miles around the plant—including all of New York City—may hold the key for shutting down Indian Point. Evacuation concerns are what doomed Long Island’s Shoreham nuclear plant before it even got running, and it doesn’t take much to imagine the gridlocked roads, bridges and tunnels that would result if news of a meltdown at Indian Point flashed across TV screens.

The risks of a disaster at Indian Point far exceed the benefits of keeping the facility operational. Mr. Leonard and Entergy’s board of directors can save their reputations, and their company, by suspending operations at Indian Point and overseeing safe disposal of its nuclear fuel. Meanwhile, Governor Pataki must take a public and principled stand against Indian Point before it’s too late. There is no need for New Yorkers to provide terrorists with another golden opportunity.

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