

Public showed its pluck in Three Mile Island disaster

By Lee Clarke

Sunday marked the 20th anniversary of the accident at Three Mile Island. It was America's worst nuclear power plant failure. At least half of the reactor core was damaged, and the containment building was contaminated. It could have been much, much worse.

As it happened, though, the failure of TMI Unit-2 was a best-worst case. The reactor did not die in vain. After all, a lot of people could have been hurt but weren't. As important, the event became a great opportunity to learn about technical failure, social organization and public response to technological disasters.

One of the most important lessons we learned has to do with "panic." The usual responses from our leaders, after any sort of major mishap, are "There was never any danger to the public," "Everything is under control" or "There is no reason to panic." It isn't hard to find "experts" who say that people in and around Harrisburg panicked when they decided to evacuate.

But what is panic? It's a sudden, overpowering feeling of terror that can lead people to act irrationally, usually to the detriment of themselves or their communities. Examples are wild stock sell-offs or the riotous scenes of uncontrolled flight in the movie "Armageddon."

Did people panic at TMI? I don't think so. Here's

what happened. Early on, none of the key agencies — including the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Federal Emergency Management Agency or state emergency organizations — was willing or able to tell people much about what was going on. Officials had no procedures for coordination; nobody was sure who was in charge. Federal and state authorities, as well as the utility, were highly distrusted, so many people did not believe official statements.

An NRC study later concluded that the emergency plans at all levels of government were strained and predictably blamed the problem on "inadequate communication networks." Eventually, Gov. Dick Thornburgh announced that pregnant women and children should evacuate. But that too was a confusing message. Did it mean teenagers were safe? Men? Women who weren't pregnant?

In the midst of official confusion, people took matters into their own hands. Schools closed on their own and people shut their windows, shielding themselves from possible radiation. Then they started to leave. Some 145,000 to 150,000 evacuated.

But they didn't run screaming through the streets. They left in an orderly way. And it worked. People behaved sensibly and with high regard for others who were evacuating.

Widespread panic is not the pattern following any type of catastrophe. We have a lot of good research on natural disasters such as the Northridge, Calif., earthquake in 1994 and the Kobe, Japan, earthquake in

1995. People did not panic there, though both earthquakes wrought considerable fear and disruption. We also know a lot about technological disasters such as TMI, Love Canal and the Woburn case (the basis for the book and movie "A Civil Action"). In such cases, people sometimes make unwise choices or act without complete information. But that's not panic.

The real pattern is one of terror, accompanied by a moment of stunned reflection or confusion, followed by fairly orderly response. Even in the horrors chronicled by the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, cities burn, houses fall and still people do not panic. The graphic stories of nuclear attack in Japan involve unparalleled horror but no panic.

Panic does exist, of course. But most of the time people seem to be quite levelheaded even when they lack information about the threats that confront them.

Our high-level officials could learn a lot by taking a page from the book of public rationality. If they realized that people are generally sensible, rather than foolish, they might stop proffering glib pronouncements when accidents happen. Better yet, they might even seek the counsel of ordinary citizens in times of crisis. Democracy may be inefficient but it is, after all, pretty smart.

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