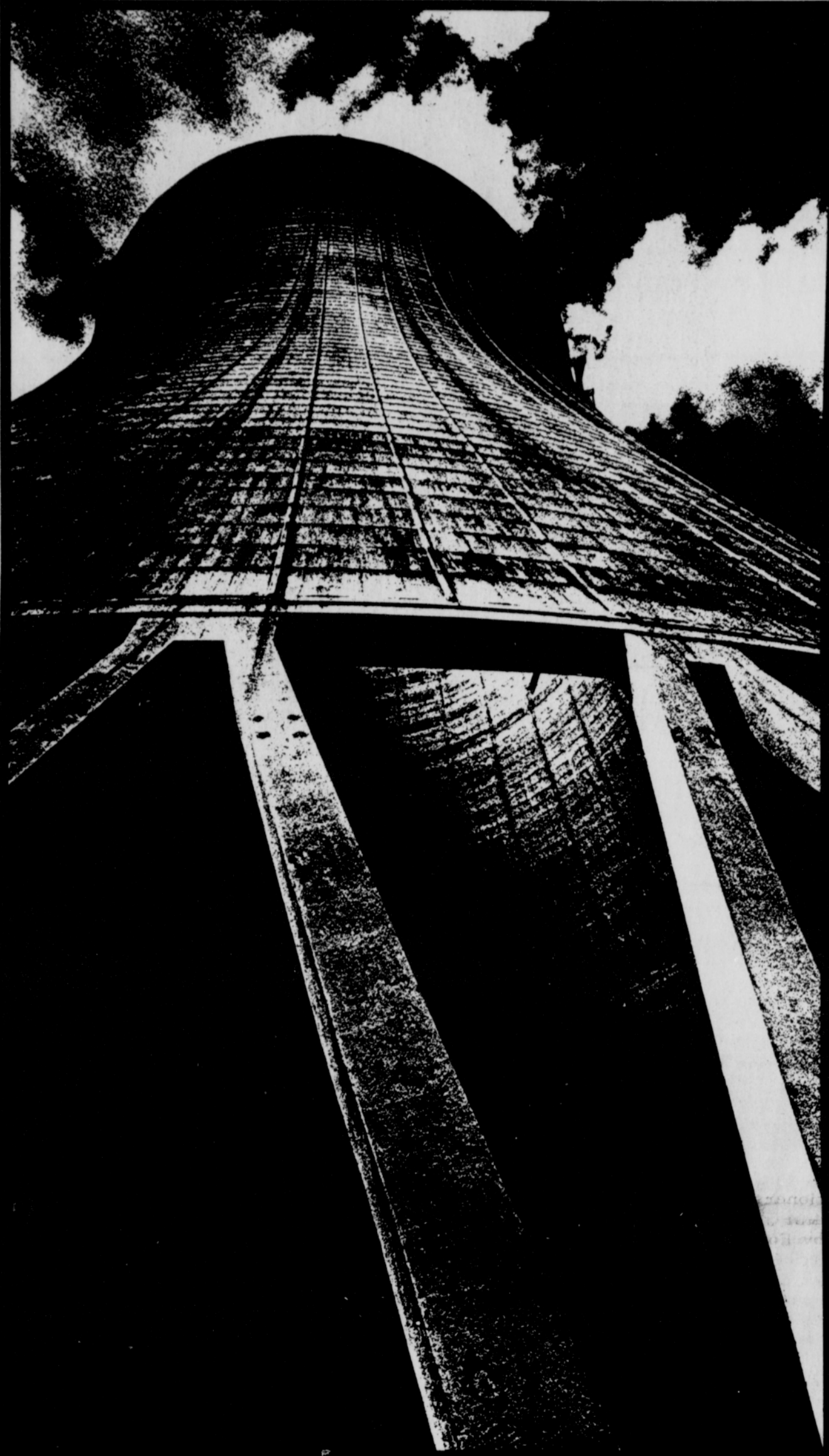




Ray Lustig

by Chuck McLaughlin

Chernobyl — a name that surely has earned its entry into the annals of nuclear infamy — will from this time forward evoke varied and profound responses from people around the world. From the Soviets themselves the memory of the anguish and the grief of the loss of loved ones, sufferings of others, contamination of water sources and forced slaughter of livestock; from the European and Scandinavian images of tearful and frightened children gagging on elixirs of potassium iodide, anxious monitoring of rising levels of radioactive particulates from skies overhead and contamination of staple foodstuffs; from the American fear of the threat carried on prevailing easterly winds toward our western shores and and its possible carcinogenic effects on our children; to those dealing in wheat futures the macabre thrill of anticipated profits; to self-serving politicians a perceived advantage and opportunity to pander to their nationalistic constituencies by denegrating the Soviets; perhaps to the conservative evangelicals another "sign" of fulfillment supporting their brand of prophetic eschatology; to the nuclear industry an urgent need to strut onto the stage of national media their most articulate proponents to again mesmerize and cajole the public into believing that it can't happen here, that precautions are not necessary because our technology, in contrast to the Russians', is so advanced; and from us all sympathy for those afflicted as well as a sense of outrage and impotence.

Cherbonyl. What is it above all else we should learn (and remember) from this portentous catastrophe? Might it be that there are striking similarities between it and the Three Mile Island debacle, as in both instances officials and experts failed to advise the citizenry of "dangerously high" releases of radioactive contaminants until days after the fact? Or perhaps that this incident is yet another to be added to the growing and frightful list of near and actual disasters, such as:

A partial core meltdown at the NRX Reactor at Chalk River, Canada during which future president Jimmy Carter, a U. S. Navy nuclear engineer received a maximum dose of radiation.

A one million dollar fire at Rocky Flats, Colorado which blew out a stack filter, releasing plutonium thousands of times in excess of allowable limits.

A graphite fire at the Windscale reactor on the northwestern English coast which contaminated with radioactive iodine all milk products within a two hundred mile radius (later dumped into the Irish Sea).

A nuclear explosion at a nuclear waste plant in the Ural Mountains in Russia which reputedly killed hundreds and contaminated hundreds of square miles of land.

# CHERNOBYL

The partial meltdown of the Waltz Mills test reactor outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The loss of control of the Dresden-2 reactor near Chicago that released radioactive iodine into the environment.

The fire at the Browns Ferry nuclear plant in Decatur, Indiana which nearly uncovered the reactor core.

The near complete meltdown of the Three Mile Island nuclear station near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania when safety systems failed and uncontrolled amounts of radioactivity were released into the environment.

And what of the now advertised fact that U. S. Department of Energy (DOE) operates and self-monitors plutonium production reactors at both the Savannah River and Hanford sites without containment structures and which are exempt from licensing by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC)? How important is the fact that the N-reactor at Hanford is not only uncontained and utilizes a graphite core shielding similar to Chernobyl but is as well twenty-three years old, produces unneeded, deadly plutonium for nuclear weapons and is situated smack on the banks of the Columbia River?

One might ask oneself how significant it is that the initial congressional subcommittee interrogating DOE, NRC and their nuclear industry bedfellows concerned itself with the lack of adequate industry liability coverage in the event of a Chernobyl-like occurrence here. Up to then it was little known by the general public that American insurance companies have consistently refused to insure the nuclear industry against risks of nuclear accidents occurring on their facilities, or during transportation of nuclear wastes, in amounts greater than one hundred and sixty million dollars. Nor was it generally known that the industry oriented Price-Anderson Act, which provides the structure for a modicum of liability coverage and is presently under consideration for renewal or amendment by the same subcommittee, is in fact designed to limit the liability of nuclear power plants for such accidents to six hundred and forty million dollars, a mere pittance in view of the obvious risks involved. Perhaps of even greater significance in this regard is that DOE liability is limited to five hundred million dollars and that the N-reactor at Hanford is a DOE facility.

Though any one of the above is, in my opinion, sufficient to challenge the integrity of the nuclear power and weapons industry, what is the bottom line? What is it that should be sufficient in this instance to move the public at large in this society from its historical political lethargy to a galvanizing experience of what is referred to in Marilyn Ferguson's "The Aquarian Conspiracy" as a "paradigm shift" — a distinctly new way of thinking about old problems? Is it not the realization that Chernobyl is a classic example of scientific and technological hubris, and that we, the ever-gullible consumers, have been hoodwinked into accepting the implementation of an obviously immature and unacceptably hazardous technology — sold to us with nary a caveat but rather glowing promises of an endless, safe and cheap source of energy? Is it not as well that we all to one degree or another have experienced a preview of a scenario all too similar to that which we will re-experience on an exponentially larger scale should the nations possessing the technology persist in their present nuclear power and weapons policies? And has not the Chernobyl affair demonstrated clearly there is and can be no adequate medical response to a major nuclear catastrophe?

One might protest that it is unfair to equate nuclear power with nuclear weapons production, to which a sufficient response is that the equation is to be found in the risks to the living environment posed by both processes and in the extended radioactive contamination exhibited in the Chernobyl fiasco. As it was put by Georgi A. Arbatov, head of The North American Institute of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Chernobyl disaster was "like one nuclear bomb explosion in the atmosphere." It should not be difficult for anyone to extrapolate from the data now available the terrible consequences we would face if an event no worse than that experienced at Chernobyl should occur near one of our large metropolitan areas or on the banks of the Columbia River. Radioactive emissions at the Chernobyl site have been monitored at one hundred and fifty roentgens per hour, and according to the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency, a total absorption of three hundred to five hundred roentgens can cause death in three to eight weeks. Consider what this would mean in the terms of even so-called "limited" exchange of nuclear weapons upon civilian or military targets.

In the opening chapter of her provocative history, "The March of Folly," Barbara Tuchman writes, "Folly's appearance is independent of era or locality; it is timeless and universal, although the habits and beliefs of a particular time and place determine the form it takes. It is unrelated to type of regime: monarchy, oligarchy and democracy produce it equally. Nor is it peculiar to nation or class." She then describes four types of misgovernment, dedicating the balance of her book to a specific manifestation of but one — folly or perversity, which she defines as "the pursuit of policy contrary to the self-interest of the constituency or state involved" and folly as "a policy that in these terms is counter-productive." Her perception is that a policy must meet three basic criteria to qualify as folly. They are: (1) It must be perceived as counter-productive in its own time, not merely by hindsight; (2) A feasible alternative course of action must have been available; (3) The policy in question should be that of a group, not an individual ruler, and should persist beyond any one political lifetime. I will leave it to the reader to weigh the history of nuclear power and weapons production policies and determine their conformance to Tuchman's criteria.

The Chernobyl incident suggests folly is truly "independent of era, locality or ideology," and if one has listened closely to the reassurances subsequently voiced by those having a vested interest in the nuclear industry, apparently nothing short of a cataclysmic failure of our nuclear operations will shake their belief in the technology's essential excellence. As recently as May 3, the DOE was insisting that a nuclear accident at Hanford was "so inconceivable" that they find no need to plan for it.

"I can see no reason why anyone should suppose that in the future, the same motifs already heard will not be sounding still... put to use by reasonable men to reasonable ends, or by madmen to nonsense and disaster." — Joseph Campbell, "The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology"