

## ***INEXCUSABLE NEGLIGENCE OR SHAM?***

**By Michael Ventura**

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When visas were issued last month to two of the September 11 hijackers President Bush got, by his own description, "pretty hot." But a week later Bush stayed cool -- in fact, he made no public comment at all -- in the wake of far more dangerous news.

*The New York Times*, March 25: "The Nuclear Regulatory Commission does not keep track of the number of foreign citizens working at nuclear power plants, how many guards are employed at the plants or what the owners spend on security, the agency told Rep. Edward J. Markey [D-Mass] in response to his questions about security after the September 11 terrorist attacks ... Mr. Markey has called for putting anti-aircraft weapons at reactor sites, saying that only four of the nation's 103 nuclear reactors were designed with a plane crash in mind and that even then designers contemplated planes much smaller than those hijacked on September 11 ... The commission said that it had consulted with the Defense Department, the Office of Homeland Security, and the Federal Aviation Administration and concluded that 'there would be enormous command and control problems and a large potential for unintended consequences and collateral damage if such weapons were deployed.'" (But isn't there a larger, much larger, "potential for unintended consequences and collateral damage" if the weapons *aren't* deployed?)

The next day, *The Los Angeles Times*: "The nation's 103 nuclear power reactors are vulnerable to a potentially catastrophic attack but have taken few safety countermeasures since September 11, even though they have been targeted by Al Qaeda ... Rep. Edward J. Markey said the nation's commercially operated reactors are at risk from a wide variety of assaults, including sabotage from foreign workers who were not adequately screened for ties to terrorist organizations ... If hijackers rammed even a relatively small plane into a nuclear reactor, it could cause a full-scale meltdown and widespread radiation contamination ... Last month, the *Times* reported that a confidential intelligence report indicates that Osama bin Laden's operatives displayed a keen interest in exploiting vulnerabilities in security at sensitive U.S. facilities, including nuclear plants ... *Twenty-one US nuclear facilities are located within five miles of an airport ...* The NRC has rejected placing anti-aircraft capabilities at nuclear facilities, *even though other countries have chosen to do so, especially for reactors located close to airports.*" [my italics]

These reports inspired little comment. I seem to be alone in finding them among the most alarming and revealing facts to surface since September 11 -- especially since Bush tirelessly says that we are in a continuing state of emergency, claiming that the terrorist threat is ever-present and will require a war lasting decades. What sense can we make, then, of his utter lack of interest in securing our nuclear reactors? I see three possibilities.

Number One: Gross incompetence. Fact: a major meltdown at one reactor could result in devastation that would dwarf the World Trade Center's; casualties could number not in the thousands but in the tens of thousands, and the contaminated areas might remain uninhabitable for decades. If Europeans see no "enormous command and control problems" in placing anti-aircraft at their reactors, surely America's military could manage -- especially around the reactors that sit within five miles of an airport. And if

our military can mount a massive operation halfway around the world in Afghanistan, surely it would not be a challenge to station anti-aircraft units at reactors within our own borders. Shouldn't this have been the first order given on September 12? It is incomprehensible, in light of the administration's warning that we are in a continuously "yellow" (serious) danger from terrorists, why in the seven months since September 11 there have been no such orders. Gross incompetence and inexcusable, criminal negligence are the nicest ways to describe Bush's inaction. Unless:

Possibility Number Two: The Bush administration has wildly exaggerated the terrorist threat for its own political ends, and sees no good reason to protect our nukes. The awful human (and economic) cost aside, consider the *political* fallout of a successful terrorist attack on an American nuclear reactor. Americans of all stripes would scream *Why?* -- why weren't precautions taken after 9/11, why were we left so vulnerable when the disaster might have been prevented, why did Bush allow us to remain in danger? What answer could possibly satisfy an enraged citizenry? Bush's credibility, his capacity to govern, would be drastically undermined in what could be the greatest political crisis in American history, since there is no constitutional mechanism for an entire administration forced to resign. It is difficult to believe that Bush and his people are too stupid to know this. So, unless they are more incompetent (Possibility Number One) than even their political foes would paint them, they must be operating on classified information that the domestic terrorist threat is minimal -- no matter what they say in public.

Consider: Attorney General John Ashcroft has supervised the detention and interrogation of thousands of suspects since September 11, with zero result. Ashcroft's people haven't even developed a lead on the anthrax attacks. We can be sure that if he had solid proof against anyone he'd be trumpeting it to the skies by now. The most extensive investigation in history has turned up next to nothing ... so ... maybe there's next to nothing to turn up.

This has happened before. In 1919 President Woodrow Wilson's attorney general, A. Mitchell Palmer, employed young J. Edgar Hoover to conduct the arrest and investigation of "revolutionary dissenters." Writes Margaret Brenman-Gibson: "Almost ten thousand persons were arrested in order that their 'caches of arms and explosives' could be seized. However, in what became known as the Palmer Raids, no dynamite could be located and only three guns were found." (That was apparently a safer and more peaceful America. Today if you raided the homes of 10,000 average citizens you'd find at least 10,000 guns -- since most gun-owners possess several.)

If the Bush administration knew, through Ashcroft's investigations and other intelligence, that the terrorist threat isn't as serious as Bush claims then it would make sense not to alarm the public by stationing highly visible military units at every reactor across America. It would also save the nuclear energy industry from a public relations debacle. Nuclear energy has been in resurgence recently, with new nukes in the planning stage for the first time in years. But what American community would permit a new nuke in its back yard if Bush was openly worried about unspeakably catastrophic consequences? Which brings up:

Possibility Number Three: The Bush administration is putting the nation at risk in order to protect its nuclear industry friends. On March 24, the day before *The New York Times* published Congressman Markey's findings, it reported that Vice-President Dick Cheney's national energy report supported "the expansion of nuclear power in the United States as a *major* [my italics] component of our national energy policy." Not only Cheney

but Karl Rove, President Bush's political strategist, met several times with a corporation called Exelon, which "owns and operates about 20% of America's nuclear capacity." Exelon has contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Republican Party; it is, in fact, one of the GOP's top donors. The nuclear industry -- one-fifth of which consists of Exelon -- is enraged at Congressman Markey, insists its security is sufficient, and that anti-aircraft guns are unnecessary. Is it possible that Bush and Cheney are so reflexively and utterly corrupt that they would endanger tens of thousands of Americans to protect their nuclear friends and their GOP coffers?

Possibility One: incompetence. Possibility Two: lies -- big lies. Possibility Three: an almost unimaginable depth of corruption. (Possibility Four: all of the above.) I'd pick window number Two. But any way you cut it, 21 nuclear reactors are within five miles of an airport; 96% weren't designed for aircraft collisions, and the 4% that were had only small aircraft in mind; *all* are unprotected from air attack. We have 103 potential nuclear catastrophes that George W. Bush pointedly ignores.

Citizens, if you don't let him know you're concerned ... if you don't ask, don't protest ... well ... do you know what it's like to die from radiation sickness? It makes AIDS look like a slight cold.

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