



The Three Mile Island Accident: The History and Legacy of America's Worst Nuclear Meltdown

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures

*Includes accounts of the meltdown by officials and local civilians

*Includes a bibliography for further reading

“On Wednesday, March 28, 1979, 36 seconds after the hour of 4:00 a.m., several water pumps stopped working in the unit 2 nuclear power plant on Three Mile Island, 10 miles southeast of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Thus began the accident at Three Mile Island. In the minutes, hours, and days that followed, a series of events --compounded by equipment failures, inappropriate procedures, and human errors and ignorance -- escalated into the worst crisis yet experienced by the nation's nuclear power industry. The accident focused national and international attention on the nuclear facility at Three Mile Island and raised it to a place of prominence in the minds of hundreds of millions. For the people living in such communities as Royalton, Goldsboro, Middletown, Hummelstown, Hershey, and Harrisburg, the rumors, conflicting official statements, a lack of knowledge about radiation releases, the continuing possibility of mass evacuation, and the fear that a hydrogen bubble trapped inside a nuclear reactor might explode were real and immediate. ... The reality of the accident, the realization that such an accident could actually occur, renewed and deepened the national debate over nuclear safety and the national policy of using nuclear reactors to generate electricity.” – Findings in a report by the Presidential Commission established to investigate the accident

Uranium is best known for the destructive power of the atom bombs, which ushered in the nuclear era at the end of World War II, but given the effectiveness of nuclear power, plants like those at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania were constructed to generate energy for Americans during the second half of the 20th century. While nuclear power plants were previously not an option and thus opened the door to new, more efficient, and more affordable forms of energy for domestic consumption, the use of nuclear energy understandably unnerved people living during the Cold War and amidst ongoing nuclear detonations. After all, the damage wrought on Hiroshima and Nagasaki made clear to everyone what nuclear energy was capable of inflicting, and the health problems encountered by people exposed to the radiation also demonstrated the horrific side effects that could come with the use of nuclear weapons or the inability to harness the technology properly.

Thus, it seemed that everyone's worst fears were realized on March 28, 1979 when the nuclear plant at Three Mile Island suffered a partial meltdown. Since it occurred years before Russia's Chernobyl disaster took place, the accident, a combination of mechanical and management failures, was at the time the worst civilian nuclear disaster yet, and the predictions of its consequences were dire. Given the release of radioactive material, nearby residents feared for their lives, and the nature of the radioactive contamination meant it would take nearly 15 years and \$1 billion to fully clean up after the disaster.

Fortunately, the human cost was eventually ruled insignificant, but the scare forced the implementation of new regulations in an effort to ensure the use of nuclear energy was safer. As a result, Three Mile Island, while still well-known among Americans today, remains more of a caution tale than a tragedy.

The Three Mile Island Accident chronicles the worst nuclear meltdown in American history and the changes made in the aftermath of the accident. Along with pictures and a bibliography, you will learn about Three

Mile Island like never before, in no time at all.

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