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# THE CASE OF THE MISSING URANIUM

by David Burnham

How and why did 200 pounds of highly enriched uranium vanish from a small processing plant in Pennsylvania? Why were federal agencies reluctant to press their investigations? And how was the theft related to Israel's simultaneous development of nuclear weapons?

**A** majority of Americans now accept the use of nuclear reactors to generate electricity. Implicit in their decision is the assumption that nuclear power is safe: reactors will not cough up huge clouds of radioactivity; wastes produced during the burning of uranium will not poison the air and water of future generations; and nuclear materials that can be fashioned into atomic bombs will not be allowed to fall into the hands of terrorist gangs or unstable nations.

As a reporter in Washington during the last few years, I began to wonder about the third part of the assumption, the idea that nuclear materials are adequately protected. In December 1974, I asked the Atomic Energy Commission exactly how many pounds of bomb-grade material—highly enriched uranium and plutonium—had disappeared from safekeeping.

Three and a half years later, after I had brought an action under the Freedom of Information Act and after the matter had been deliberated by the National Security Council, the State Department, and the Justice Department, the government finally answered my question. As of the end of 1976, taking into account all of the nuclear facilities in the United States, 8000 pounds of highly enriched uranium and plutonium

could not be accounted for—enough, in theory, to make hundreds of clandestine atomic weapons.

Where had the 8000 pounds gone? How was such a loss possible? What about all the assurances that nuclear power is safe? The officials who announced the cumulative total of what they call MUF (material unaccounted for) contended they had no evidence that a significant amount of it had been stolen. The MUF, they explained, almost certainly was stuck in the pipes of the processing machines, was "lost" through faulty bookkeeping procedures, or had been accidentally thrown away with radioactive trash such as scrap metal and wiping rags.

Despite the assurances of government and industry scientists committed to the broad use of atomic power, however, the Central Intelligence Agency and several congressional committees are convinced that, in at least one instance, a foreign government probably obtained from an American plant, illegally, enough highly enriched uranium to arm itself with nuclear bombs.

The single case of what may be the world's most important theft in the last two decades involves Israel and a company called the Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation. The case has now generated at least ten separate investigations by such groups as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, the General Accounting Office, the Atomic Energy Commission, and four congressional committees. Several of the investigations are still under way.

The mystery surrounding NUMEC and how the Atomic Energy Commission and the FBI reacted when they learned the company's managers were unable to account for about 200 pounds of highly enriched uranium

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