

Darrell G. Moen, Ph.D.

Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Deadly Deception: General Electric, Nuclear Weapons, and Our Environment

Deadly Deception: General Electric, Nuclear Weapons, and Our Environment

(Academy Award Winner for Best Documentary Short: 1991: 29 mins.)

Produced and Directed by Debra Chasnoff

Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen

Tom Bailey (Mesa, Washington): The next house, cancer. This house, a man and a woman lived here by the name Voss. Jack Voss died of cancer and his wife gave birth to a deformed child. She drowned the child in the bathtub and then committed suicide that same day. Down the road a little further here, the next household, the father died of cancer, the mother has leukemia right now, and the daughter has thyroid cancer and takes thyroid medication. Somebody, somewhere said, "Let's keep lying to them, and if we keep lying to them over and over again, they'll end up believing it." And we did end up believing what they said. And some people still do.

Narrator (caption insert): This is the story of a product that General Electric manufactures, but doesn't advertise to the public - and of the people who are working to change the deadliest business of all, the nuclear weapons industry.

June Casey: When I was in high school, I was able to participate in many, many school activities, so I was going, you know, 24 hours a day as most young people do. And then it was when I was at Whitman College that I came home for Christmas and my parents noticed that something was drastically wrong with me. They took me to a physician, and the physician said that I had the most severe case of hypo-thyroidism he had ever seen in his career. The basal metabolic rate was a minus 36. He said, "You're physical movements and behavior are those of someone about 90 years old instead of someone who is 19."

Narrator: The college June Casey was attending was located in Walla Walla, Washington, 50 miles downwind from the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, a massive 570 square mile facility where General Electric made plutonium for the U.S. military between 1946 and 1965.

June Casey: And then I started losing my hair, and I had long, naturally-curly hair. I then had to start wearing a wig, and have since lost two babies, one through miscarriage and the other through stillbirth. I have thyroid nodules which have to be watched. The endocrinologist said that I could contract thyroid cancer at any time.

Narrator: Around the same time that June Casey lost her hair, Tom Bailey was a toddler. For years, he drank the milk and ate the food grown on his family's farm which was located right next to the Hanford reactors.

Tom Bailey: Well, growing up here downwind from Hanford never meant anything to us because it was just a neighbor. Our business was to grow food and their business was to make nuclear weapons. And we never paid any attention to what they did. We never looked over the fence. But we always had deformed farm animals. The largest amount of farm animals at one time was 80 calves out of 200 cows that were grossly deformed. Either they died or they were too deformed to walk. We had deformed sheep, deformed kittens, deformed chickens. In some years, there were a lot of them, and in other years there weren't so many.

Narrator: In the mid-1980s, Tom Bailey began to wonder: If the animals on the farms were so affected, what about the people? He himself was born with birth defects, and today is sterile. He surveyed the 28 families who lived in a small area near Hanford, and found that 27 of them had suffered severe health problems, all of which are associated with exposure to high doses of radiation. This area is now known as "the death mile."

Tom Bailey: This is the north corner of it here, beginning with the Weinberger household. The 1973 March of Dimes poster child was born there with no eyes. The family back in behind here, the boy and his wife just had a child born with no skull.

Narrator: June Casey and the residents of "death mile" are not alone. Thousands of people who lived in the northwestern United States have experienced similar devastating health problems. As the medical histories of Hanford "downwinders" began to come to light, the government was forced to begin revealing some of the classified documents about what had really been going on at Hanford.

A picture has begun to emerge of enormous radioactive releases - some accidental, and many intentional - into the air, the ground, and the Columbia River which runs right through the Hanford complex. Enormous radioactive releases that G.E. knew about at the time, but chose to cover up.

Tom Bailey: We took, here in Eastern Washington State, the downwind area, twice the amount of radiation as the children at Chernobyl took. And at Chernobyl, they impounded all the milk, they evacuated whole towns, they cordoned off hundreds of

miles of farmland. They [the Soviets] evacuated their people, and they warned them. And here, there was absolutely no warning. They didn't evacuate anybody. Quite to the contrary, they came and said, "You're safe."

Narrator: One of the worst incidents during G.E.'s tenure at Hanford was a calculated experiment in which radioactive particles containing more than 500 times the radiation of the Three Mile Island accident were deliberately released into the air. The documents explaining why this experiment was done are still classified.

June Casey: Well, it was on Mother's Day of 1986 when I read an article in my local newspaper describing this release, a deliberate and secret experiment by the G.E. Hanford plant in 1949 when I was a student at Whitman College. And I just knew immediately, it was like a knife in my heart, I said to myself, "Oh, no." And I really was in tears all day. I knew immediately that what had happened to me then was related to that secret experiment.

Narrator: The toxic and radioactive legacy left behind at Hanford is staggering. There were at least 1,100 contaminated sites on the grounds [of the Hanford site]. The Columbia River, a source of food and place of recreation for people throughout the Northwest, is now the most radioactive river in the world. Two-thirds of the high-level radioactive waste from U.S. weapons production is stored at Hanford in tanks that leak, and as some scientists have warned, could explode.

Cleaning up these environmental disasters is expected to cost at least \$60 billion (\$60,000,000,000) and take over 30 years, with General Electric leaving its share of the cost to the U.S. taxpayers. Thousands of "downwinders" are now suing for damages. The government has now begun to acknowledge its role in the devastation at Hanford. So far, General Electric has not.

June Casey: All they've ever said in their letters to me is, "We left all the documents behind, so we don't know any more than you do or what you read in the newspapers." And I guess I find that very hard to believe.

Narrator: According to the business press, General Electric is the most powerful company in the United States. And G.E. is rapidly expanding its control of markets worldwide. G.E. owns NBC, Hotpoint, and RCA, and in its annual report boasts of its leadership role in each of the products it manufactures. But the one product line it never mentions is nuclear weapons, where G.E. has also been an industry leader.

Continuing in the role it carved out at Hanford, today G.E. makes critical components for more nuclear weapons systems than any other company. And the trail of radioactive and toxic wastes that G.E. is leaving behind at research and production sites across the U.S. also continues to grow and grow. G.E. builds the neutron trigger for every U.S.

hydrogen bomb; is a prime contractor for "Star Wars" and the new radioactive space reactor, the SP-100; a moving force behind the deadly Trident submarine and missile, the B-1 and B-2 bombers, the MX, Minuteman, and Cruise missiles, the F-111, and the list goes on and on.

Rear Admiral Gene La Rocque (Ret.): We have about 30,000 nuclear weapons. Far more than enough to defend ourselves. But industry exerts a lot of influence on whether or not we buy weapons. And General Electric is one of our foremost defense contractors. The American public ought to become aware of the fact that it is these companies, like General Electric, that push the U.S. Congress into building more weapons than we need.

G.E. television commercial: "Progress" in the defense of our nation. And at General Electric, "progress" is our most important product.

Narrator: In the beginning of the atomic age, General Electric helped make the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And today, G.E. continues to be a key player behind the scenes in determining federal nuclear weapons policy thanks to the company's high volume of PAC [political action committee] contributions; its 150 person Washington D.C. lobbying office, the largest of any weapons contractor; and the revolving door between the military and G.E.'s top executive offices through which people like General David Jones, former Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Reagan, have ended up serving on G.E.'s Board of Directors. And G.E.'s influence in Washington D.C. starts right at the top [at the White House].

Among the handful of corporate CEOs (Chief Executive Officer) who have direct access to President Bush is G.E.'s Jack Welch. Today, one of G.E.'s most lucrative contracts is for testing and building critical components for the Trident submarine. Much of this work is done at the Knolls Atomic Power Laboratories, a nuclear weapons complex located in upstate New York. There are close to 400 tons of lethal waste buried in dozens of secret landfill sites on the facility's grounds. Three of the five reactors in the Knolls complex were built without the containment structures or backup emergency core cooling systems found in all commercial nuclear reactors.

But as it did while running Hanford, General Electric insists that there is no danger at Knolls. In the four decades of operation, G.E. has stated, "there has been no significant impact from Knolls site operations on the environment or adverse effects on the community or the public." In fact, G.E. claims it wants its workforce to alert management to health, safety, and environmental concerns.

Jack Welch (CEO, General Electric): People are recognizing that their voice means something. People from the union floor, people from everywhere, are giving their ideas. The people closest to the work know the work best. So the ideas are coming

from them. We're responding. They're saying, "Geez, if I say something, those "Bozos" up there listen to me. They act. They do something." And we're acting. And we're doing things with them.

Narrator: General Electric's doors were not open for Jack Shannon, the Manager of Nuclear Criticality Safety at the Kesselring Site of the Knolls complex. After 30 years of devoted service, Shannon filed an inspection report that concluded that G.E. apparently had been falsifying records about how much asbestos Knolls workers had been exposed to. He also raised concerns about insufficient fire protection at the site's nuclear reactors, and about G.E.'s failure to set up an emergency evacuation plan for the surrounding community. Instead of addressing the problems Shannon raised, G.E. went after him.

Jack Shannon: Within a month after I published my inspection report, I was summarily removed from my management position. Subsequent to that, I was again demoted several months later to performing data entry work in a nuclear reactor design organization, an organization I had left in about 1969 or 1970. My career at G.E. took a nosedive.

Tom Carpenter (Attorney, Government Accountability Project): Here was a man who had brilliant performance ratings, the highest you could get, exceptional, superior, with comments by the General Manager of the facility written directly onto his performance appraisals, about what a "golden-haired boy" he was at the plant. Well, suddenly, [management's attitude was that] he couldn't tie his shoes.

Jack Shannon: This kind of retaliation is fairly standard and I think it has been going on for 40 or 50 years. When you find a problem, you don't correct the problem, you get rid of the guy who brought the problem to your attention.

Tom Carpenter (Attorney, Government Accountability Project): A week after my visit with the Knolls workers, G.E. issued a site-wide gag order forbidding all comment by Knolls employees about the plant. And if you failed to live up to the directive, then you faced (according to the gag order) termination, a \$100,000 fine, and life imprisonment.

Narrator: Despite the gag order, some workers have continued to speak out about the hazards of G.E.'s nuclear weapons work at Knolls, particularly about the lack of protection the workers there have to exposure to asbestos and other toxic and radioactive substances.

Doug Allen (Knolls Quality Control Inspector, Union Member): Through the newspapers, we started compiling a list and by about 1988 we were up to 145 members who have died of one type of cancer or another. They virtually contaminated

themselves with asbestos, breathing it in. How much [did they breathe in]? Nobody knows.

Narrator: Part of the reason nobody knows is because of a Presidential Order that exempts the Knolls facilities from standard health, safety, and environmental oversight regulations. By citing national security concerns, top executives at General Electric and the Department of Energy have seen to it that they are the only people who know the full extent of the dangers at Knolls.

Doug Allen: Why do all these autopsies show that the lungs are all covered with asbestos fibers or that these guys have had lungs removed because they were full of asbestos? In order to have that much asbestos [in the lungs], you had to have exceeded official limits sometimes! But according to management, we never have. And it's been an on-going in-house battle between me and General Electric since 1986 to get asbestos cleaned up.

Jack Welch (CEO, General Electric): And we're acting. And we're doing things with them. So, as a result of that, they're willing to bring up more significant things, their self-confidence is rising, and they're bringing up things that matter.

Doug Allen: I'd like to invite Jack Welch up here to Knolls Atomic Power Lab. I'd like him to meet some of the spouses of some of the employees who were employed there. The spouses I had to talk to at the wakes and funerals. Let him visit them and explain to them why their husbands' lungs were covered with asbestos or filled with asbestos, why their husbands died of cancer related to the asbestos. I'd like to have him explain to them instead of me trying to, why it was their husbands who died.

Don Cole: That's Dick on the right. He's got a smile on his face. He always seemed to look on the positive side of things.

Narrator: For nine years, Don Cole's brother Dick worked at Knoll's as a refueling engineer. A healthy man who didn't drink or smoke, Dick suddenly ended up in the hospital one summer with cancerous tumors throughout his body.

Don Cole: His doctor asked him if there had been any exposure [to carcinogens] during his years of work at General Electric. He knew that there had been some internal exposure, that that had been documented, but he didn't have a copy of the document. And so, he asked his manager if he would prepare a copy of that document. The report was drawn, and it was at that point that Dick realised that something was terribly wrong because the report indicated that there had been only one exposure at one particular point in his work. And he was aware of at least nine exposures.

Narrator: Thirty-one-year-old Dick Cole decided to try to set the record straight and protect the health of other nuclear weapons workers. In a 35-page affidavit, he documented each of the times he had been exposed to radiation, as well as G.E.'s failure to properly monitor or record those exposures.

Don Cole: They were trying to measure the degree of hazard, but the measurement devices were inadequate. The film badges and the personal pocket decimeters that they were wearing on their left shoulders were not scanning the whole bodies. They weren't required to wear respiratory materials such as masks, none of that happened. So he was always at risk in some way or another. They didn't mark some of the areas where the radioactive contamination was, and on occasion, he walked into these areas, not knowing because there were no [warning] signs.

Shortly before Dick died, I got this letter in the mail: "My Dearest brother, This week I wrote letters to both the kids telling them that I am dying and that I love them. I think that was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life. I have been in pain now for nearly a year, and the thought of not being with them much longer tears at my heart whenever I look at them. I bear no ill will to anyone at Knolls. I think I have made some fine friends there. I do think that it is through G.E.'s negligent policies that I was unnecessarily exposed to internal and external doses of radiation of unknown quantities and that this is why I am now dying of cancer. Take care. I love you very much. Dick." And that's what he said.

Dick issued the affidavits, then died. Once he died, the investigation stopped. It was as though, to General Electric, this never happened.

Jack Welch: We have a total commitment to make every person in the company an environmentalist. We are painting and lighting all factories to new standards so people feel that they are in a very clean atmosphere and it gives them another sense of the environment.

Narrator: Despite its public relations campaign, G.E. has yet to take responsibility for the problems caused by its involvement in the nuclear weapons industry. Choosing instead to keep making more [television] commercials about the technology behind G.E. products. [G.E. commercial: "All our science, our technology, our mathematics - somehow they add up to moments beyond any calculation."] But all the life-affirming ads money can buy can't undo the environmental and health damage General Electric has caused.

Not only in its nuclear weapons work, but in the manufacture of other products as well. G.E. has the largest number of Superfund Toxic Dump Sites in the U.S., and according to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) data, releases more cancer-causing

chemicals than any other corporation. The health problems and birth defects caused by General Electric's "commitment to the environment" are impossible to quantify.

Rear Admiral Gene La Rocque (Ret.): General Electric is in this business of building weapons for profit - not for patriotism, not for the country, not for the flag - but for profit, and the American public, if they want to change General Electric's attitude on building weapons, the only thing we can do is stop buying their other products like refrigerators and light bulbs.

INFACT Boycott G.E. Campaign volunteer (at a shopping center): If you can take a second to stop nuclear weapons, we just need your signature right over here. It makes a big difference.

Narrator: Four million (4,000,000) individuals and 450 organizations in the U.S., Canada, and around the world have decided to join the G.E. Boycott, a grassroots campaign to force General Electric to stop producing nuclear weapons and take responsibility for the damage it has caused. The campaign, which has already cost G.E. hundreds of millions of dollars, is run by INFACT, the group that forced Nestle, the world's largest food corporation, to change its unethical marketing practices of infant formula.

Nancy Cole (Executive Director, INFACT): One of the major strategies of INFACT's campaign to stop the production and promotion of nuclear weapons is to focus on the industry leader, and that's G.E. When G.E. pulls out of the nuclear weapons business, that will be a signal to all of the other companies that nuclear weapons is a business that nobody wants to, or can afford to, be in.

Narrator: One of the retailers that has joined INFACT's campaign is a Midwestern chain of More 4 supermarkets. More 4 Stores stopped carrying G.E. products after co-owner Greg Ericson got fed up with G.E.'s television commercials.

Greg Ericson: What G.E. does is not "bring good things to life." They mislead the American public. They pollute the earth, they dump toxic wastes, they irradiate their workers, and they are one of the largest producers of nuclear weapons in the world. I find their ads disgusting. Our distributor requested a meeting to discuss our decision to terminate selling G.E. light bulbs. G.E. sent their Consumer Affairs Director, Ford Slater. The conversation [at the meeting] drifted along the lines of economic, sweetheart deals. And after listening to this for about 20 or 25 minutes, I just leaned in and told Mr. Slater that there was no way that our company was selling General Electric bulbs, even if they were to give them to us for free.

Narrator: In addition to the retail boycott, INFACT is having its most dramatic success with G.E.'s sales of medical equipment. Scores of religious and health care organizations in many countries are now participating in the campaign.

Sister Norita Cooney (CEO, Mercy Midlands Hospitals): We found an innate contradiction between G.E. on the one hand developing the technology we're using in health care to enhance life, and on the other hand producing and marketing equipment that was geared to destroying life. What we're doing is we're directing our people to look at purchasing equipment other than G.E. equipment whenever possible. We've been able to purchase an MRI unit from a company other than G.E. that cost approximately \$1.3 million (\$1,300,000). We've also purchased a CAT scanner for \$1.2 million (\$1,200,000), and we're in the process of purchasing some angiography equipment that will probably cost between \$300,000 and \$400,000.

You're talking about an impact that big bucks on G.E. Over one-third of the health care institutions in the United States are sponsored by religious congregations. And it seems to me, if we could get the congregations involved in this [boycott] campaign, we could have a tremendous impact on G.E. And in fact, I think we're already having an impact on G.E. Since this campaign has begun, G.E. has quadrupled the amount of money they spend on "image advertising," you know, those "warm and fuzzy" TV ads. G.E. is now flying high-level corporate executives all over the country to meet with major purchasers of G.E. products, trying to convince them not to be a part of this boycott.

And most significantly, G.E. is finally starting to move out of the nuclear weapons business. Since we launched the boycott in 1986, G.E.'s nuclear weapons work has decreased 28%. And in the fall of 1990, a major, major campaign victory: G.E. publicly announced that it's not going to make the neutron triggers for nuclear bombs anymore. That's one of the first things that we asked G.E. to do when we started this campaign. So this isn't a symbolic effort. We're in this to win!

Demonstrator in front of the G.E. Star Wars Research Lab (San Jose, California): We let them know that we're leaving these barrels of radioactive waste here [in front of their facilities] as symbols of what G.E. has been poisoning the environment with, and he said that he didn't want to accept them. And one of the protestors here said, "Are you asking us to clean up your toxic wastes again?" So, we're going to leave these here.

June Casey: Because of the fact that G.E. owns NBC, we do not see many of these facts [concerning G.E. irresponsibility] presented in the mainstream news, so it's up to us through our [grassroots] networking to get this information out.

Jack Shannon: It seems to me that we have enough of these devices to make war. I think it's about time we started thinking about making devices to make peace.

Caption insert: INFACT Nuclear Weaponmakers Campaign. INFACT challenges G.E. to: Stop all nuclear weapons work; Stop promoting nuclear weapons to the government; Redirect its resources to peaceful production.

Update [from the video jacket]: On April 2, 1993, G.E. took a dramatic step out of nuclear weapons by selling its Aerospace Division, removing one of the most powerful forces influencing nuclear weapons policymaking. INFACT responded by declaring victory and calling off the seven-year boycott. INFACT's purpose is to stop life-threatening abuses of transnational corporations and increase their accountability to people all over the world. INFACT is now working to stop the abuses of the deadly tobacco industry.

For more information contact:

INFACT

256 Hanover Street

Boston, Massachusetts 02113

U.S.A.

TEL: (617) 742-4583