

Powers That Be:

The NBC Documentary You Never Got to See



This year, KNBC-Los Angeles was responsible for three programs which, when added to its 1969 blockbuster, "The Slow Guillotine," gave it the lead in environmental coverage, local and network. Again, they were the work of Don Widener, who took his local crew as far afield as the Baltic Sea to gather evidence. "Timetable for Disaster" was a consideration of global water pollution problems. "A Sea of Troubles" covered the unhappy lot of fishermen and fisheries on both coasts due to mercury and DDT. "Powers that Be" was a harsh, frightening look at the activities of the AEC. It went on the air despite pressure from the AEC to keep it off and impede production along the way. Although these shows were of the highest quality and formed a series which any other local station in the nation would be hardpressed to match, they seemed to be at an end: Widener's contract was not picked up.

—The Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Survey of Broadcast Journalism, 1971

For more than three years, Pacific Gas and Electric, the giant power company which services much of Northern California, has suppressed a frightening television documentary on the dangers of nuclear reactors. The hour-long film, "Powers that Be," produced by award-winning producer/writer Don Widener, and narrated for a token fee by Jack Lemmon, was shown on May 17, 1971, over KNBC-TV in Los Angeles. Shortly thereafter, PG&E launched a letter-writing campaign against the film and its producer, bombarding network and government officials alike with accusations of distortion and unethical conduct. An exchange of lawsuits followed—Widener asking for a \$3 million libel judgment, and PG&E seeking a

permanent injunction against use of the film, as well as \$6 million in damages. For its part, well before any legal action had been taken, KNBC-TV hastened to withdraw the film from its library.

With nearly \$5 billion in assets, PG&E is America's second largest private power company, only a step behind New York's Consolidated Edison. And where financially shaky Con Ed has had to turn over responsibility for its latest nuclear reactor to the state of New York, PG&E has been moving forward confidently into its nuclear future. Yet its sharp reaction to "Powers that Be" suggests that PG&E's confidence is giving way to a bad case of nerves.

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Producer Don Widener sees himself as an environmentalist, not as an enemy of technology. Originally a public relations man at the NBC owned and operated television station in Los Angeles, in 1969 he decided to try his hand at making documentaries on environmental issues, well before ecology had attained the status of a movement. His first effort, a grim study of air pollution called "The Slow Guillotine," was aired in 1969; acclaimed as the year's best news documentary, it won both an Emmy and the Alfred I. DuPont award.

Armed with a budget of \$50,000, Widener and his crew travelled across the United States, visiting nuclear power plants in California, filming nuclear waste disposal sites in New York, Colorado, Washington and Nevada, interviewing critics of nuclear power, AEC officials, and spokesmen for the industry. The result was "Powers that

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by Elliot Kanter

Site of intended PG&E nuclear plant at Bodega Head, Calif.



Aero Photographers

Path of San Andreas Fault through Bodega Head



Moratorium:

Taking the Initiative in California

For ten years one of the most beautiful promontories on the California coast has had a big hole in it. It is on Bodega Head, about 75 miles north of San Francisco, and about 1300 feet off the dead center line of the famous San Andreas Fault of 1906 earthquake fame. The people who dug this hole intended to put a nuclear reactor in it. It is still a hole, instead of a reactor, because a surprisingly large and vocal coalition of Northern Californians decided that they would rather not have their electricity generated in that way in that place. They got some help from other parts of the country, and generally kicked up a fuss. Strange as it seems in this day and age, it *can* be done.

Other battles have been fought in California, one reactor at a time—some won, some lost. This year, another coalition of Californians is trying to fight the whole nuclear-power thing at once. If they are able to get together the signatures of 325,000 registered voters, the California electorate will have the opportunity to say “yes” or “no” to something called the Land Use and Nuclear Power Plant Safety Act. It faces, as you might guess, massive opposition from oil companies, utility companies, and other exemplars of

American free enterprise.

This exhibition of citizen power has been undertaken to combat a certain lie the utility companies, and the Atomic Energy Commission, have combined to promote—that nuclear power in its present form is safe. Those who are old enough will recall that this is the same AEC that used to tell us that there was no danger in fallout. The truth is quite simple: nuclear reactors are *always* unsafe to some degree, in about eight different ways, even if there is never a major accident.

The chance of such a major accident is indeed small (although any odds you see quoted are mere guesswork). One such accident, however, would be quite enough—it could quite easily kill every human being for a hundred miles downwind. Some AEC types say that we just have to live with this uncertainty, as we live with the dangers of earthquakes. We do not, however, set out to create the sources of earthquakes—or, for that matter, hurricanes, tornadoes, or floods.

Accidents aside, a nuclear power plant means an increase in radiation, and—without going into a great burst of science writing and repeating all the information made pub-

by Gene Marine