

RISK AND THE PRODUCTION OF SYMBOLIC
SAFETY: A STUDY OF WEAPONS INCENERATION
IN ANNISTON, ALABAMA

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Stash away the duct tape. Don’t use it now: stash it away and that pre-measured plastic sheeting for future—and I emphasize future use. You probably won’t need it, but in case you do, you’ll have it available¹”

--Tom Ridge

Human societies have always confronted hazards and risk. Throughout history people have had to cope with devastating natural disasters, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods. Societies have mobilized considerable resources and sacrificed numerous lives to wage wars across the globe. In some cases, groups have sought to advance their own interests by subverting established political structures and processes, employing violent tactics and committing deadly acts of terrorism. And human beings sometimes fall prey to their own inventions, developing dangerous technologies aimed at making life easier that end up causing horrific technological disasters.

¹ (Kolberg 2004:114)

As Ulrich Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990) point out, modern society is defined largely by risk. Natural, technological, and human-induced hazards pervade our lives. Disasters occur frequently, cause staggering amounts of financial damage, and exact severe death tolls on the societies they impact. Moreover, efforts to improve safety and mitigate future disasters sometimes make matters worse. As Mileti (1999) and Perrow (1984) demonstrate, we often build unsafe structures, approve land development in hazard-prone areas, and produce technologies with inherent flaws and strong propensities for failure. Hurricane Katrina and the recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico are but two recent examples (Freudenburg, Gramling, Laska, and Erikson 2009; Freudenburg and Gramling 2011).

Despite our long history and recent experiences with catastrophes, industrial and post-industrial societies still have not developed adequate means for assessing risk, mitigating threats, and ensuring safety. That is in large part because people often do not agree on what is risky and what is not, and even when they do, there are typically differing views on what should be done to reduce the risk. In other words, risk and safety are socially constructed phenomena. Rather than being purely objective and quantifiable, risk is something that various individuals, groups, and organizations contest. Through a process of claims-making and framing, societies struggle to arrive at socially constructed definitions of acceptable risk (Clarke 1989). Based upon that process, safety measures consistent with the prevailing definitions of risk are formulated. Thus, risk and safety tend to be defined and constructed by those with the greatest access to and control over the claims-making arena, which are typically powerful governmental and corporate actors.

Symbolic Safety

To illustrate the social construction of risk and safety, consider the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. On that day, terrorists hijacked several commercial airliners and crashed them into the World Trade Center towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., killing

approximately 3,000 people. This kind of attack had been a prominent threat in other societies for many years, and it had even occurred previously in the United States in 1993 when the World Trade Center was bombed and in the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Nevertheless, before the attacks of September 11, lawmakers, public officials, emergency managers, and ordinary citizens had not been overly concerned or preoccupied with the threat of terrorism.

All of that changed, of course, following the attacks. The specter of terrorism was used to launch global wars, craft and pass policies and laws allowing for more aggressive pursuit and treatment of terror suspects, implement new invasive screening procedures in public places such as airports, and establish a new federal bureaucracy called the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). More relevant to this research, the newly created DHS developed the Homeland Security Alert System (HSAS) to inform the public about the possibility of future terrorist attacks.

HSAS was a risk communication tool that presented the threat of terrorism on a color-coded chart. Green indicated low risk, blue was guarded, yellow was elevated, orange was high, and red was severe. The threat level was publicized every day on government websites, in airports, and on cable news channels. As pervasive as it was, the HSAS had major shortcomings. For example, once it was developed, the threat level never fell below the yellow (i.e., elevated) level. Additionally, many political commentators speculated that the system could be used to influence political elections, fearing that the level would be raised not due to an actual increase in risk but instead to help garner votes. Most importantly, the alert system lacked all of the characteristics of an effective warning system (Aguirre 2004). An effective warning communicates detailed information about the threat, describes specific geographic areas or segments of the population exposed to the threat, and provides clear and consistent instructions on what protective actions should be taken. The HSAS did none of those things. It provided only a vague description of the threat, generalized the threat to the entire nation, and failed to tell people what they should do to be safe. As a result of these shortcomings, DHS began to phase out the HSAS in early 2011 and replaced it with a new warning tool.

As this example clearly shows, risk and safety are social constructs, even in the context of a highly visible threat such as terrorism. To further illustrate the consequences of these social constructions, consider the words of former Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge, the first Secretary of Homeland Security, which are quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, he suggested that U.S. citizens follow the newly constructed HSAS, and he urged them to purchase plastic and duct tape to protect themselves against chemical or biological attack (Vries 2003; Lichtblau and Drew 2004). In retrospect, these suggestions seem dishonest or even comical, but at the time, these suggestions were taken seriously enough that Americans rushed to their local hardware stores and cleared the shelves of duct tape and plastic sheeting (Vries 2003; Ridge and Bloom 2009). This is a clear example of “symbolic safety.” Symbolic safety is socially constructed, based on official definitions of risk, and promoted by those in power to appease the public and create the impression that things are under control.

Contemporary society has largely become denoted by its ubiquitous risk (Giddens 1990; Beck 1992; Shriver, Cable, Norris, and Hastings 2000), and to a large degree, this process will not go away in the foreseeable future. I contend that many organizations do this knowingly, but at the same time, they produce contingency planning to compensate for this fact (Clarke 1999). Like Clarke, I assert this planning is largely fantasy. These organizations offer symbolic safety, and considering the sheer amount of risk we all share and the degree of technological development of the last century, this process will become increasingly important to those critically studying society.

Symbolic safety offers the illusion of security, allowing those producing risk to continue putting the public in danger. It does this through the manipulation of reason. These organizations encourage the public to disengage their imagination concerning the possibilities for accidents and disasters (Clarke 2006). They downplay the possibilities for an accident, while overestimating their potential to respond and deal with an emergency. Simultaneously, these organizations carefully craft and insert their own definitions of reality—informing the public what is reasonable, legitimate, and

realistic. This construction becomes reified through the production and distribution of emergency plans and objects. When effective, symbolic safety calms the public and silences critics. It frames oppositional thoughts as unmerited, illegitimate, and ultimately problematic. Symbolic safety legitimates those in power, thereby reinforcing social arrangements and extending the status quo.

These tactics should be studied, as technological disasters will happen, and eventually some of these fantasies will fail; many—usually the most marginalized—people will suffer, and some will die. Research addressing symbolic safety promotes the kind of critical thinking and analysis that may better prepare societies to reduce potential problems in the future.

Research Objectives and Rationale

This research examines the social construction of risk and safety around the chemical weapons stockpile and incinerator in Anniston, Alabama. It seeks to answer the following research questions: First, what aspects of organizationally produced symbolic safety are salient to the public? Second, how does the public perceive and consume organizationally produced symbolic safety? Through the collection of personal interviews, historical documents, and personal accounts, this study addresses these fundamental questions concerning how incineration became a reality for the people of Anniston, Alabama.

This kind of research is important for at least two primary reasons. First, this research not only documents how organizations communicate risk information, but importantly, it also addresses how the public makes sense of the various tactics these organizations implement. Understanding this communicative process elucidates both the manufacture of public acquiescence and how incineration proponents maintain and even increase their legitimacy with the very public they place in risk. Second, this research produces fresh theoretical insight into this intriguing social event. This new theoretical insight illustrates how contemporary organizations communicate risk and mold reality through the production and distribution of symbolic safety.

Findings from this study also have important practical implications in terms of better understanding risk communication. Emergency planners typically focus on the construction and implementation of mitigation efforts for a disaster or some kind of an accident. The production and distribution of risk information and materials are important aspects of planning for an emergency. However, audiences are not passive bystanders in the negotiation of social reality. The production and distribution of these plans accounts for part of this process. People will ultimately evaluate the worth and usefulness of the information and materials given to them. They will make important decisions based on how they make sense of emergency planning, and people make these decisions through a process that is highly social. Sociologists, in particular, are well equipped to study this dynamic process, and further, we need to study this process. Understanding how people interpret emergency planning will positively contribute to future efforts to mitigate and prepare for disasters.

Preview of the Remaining Chapters

Chapter II explores the history leading up to the construction of the Anniston incinerator. These socio-historical conditions serve as the foundation for these events in Anniston, and they still factor into the perceptions of people living in the area. Anniston is historically noted for the bombing of the Freedom Riders Bus, but this notoriety extends into a legacy of environmental racism resulting from the polluting activities of Monsanto/Solutia. Although not the focus of this study, this contextualizes the community's complex relationship to chemicals. Additionally, Anniston has deep historical and economic ties to the military. This chapter will connect Anniston to the military industrial complex, and it will demonstrate Calhoun County's economic dependency on the Anniston Army Depot. This will include a description of Anniston's significant chemical weapon stockpile and the international treaty that mandating its destruction. Together, these historical, economic, and social factors will help ground the conclusions of this study, and they will provide a more encompassing description of these events in Anniston, Alabama.

Chapter III reviews relevant literature on risk and disasters. It begins by discussing traditional scholarship on disasters that emphasizes how social structures respond to system disruptions. It then contrasts that approach with a more critical, social constructionist point of view emphasizing interaction, negotiation, and the symbolic nature of social reality. This contemporary view incorporates fantasy documents, and it extends this logic into the creation and distribution of fantasy objects. This literature will support the conclusions of the study.

Chapter IV discusses the research methods for this project. This study exclusively comes out of the qualitative tradition. Qualitative methods are well suited for this research, as they permit the researcher to inductively and deductively gather research data. It also allows the research participants to contribute their voice to these events in Anniston. This chapter will also introduce the reflexive ethnographic element of this research, and it will cover the substantive parts of this kind of qualitative work: the sampling process, the qualitative interview method, and the data analysis process.

Chapter V begins the data analysis portion of this project. Grounded in the words of the research participants, it will describe the production and distribution of symbolic safety. This will include the risk information and materials coming from the organizations supporting the stockpile and chemical incinerator. This chapter will begin by addressing the lack of transparency at the Anniston Army Depot, and it will continue into describing the overhanging diagnostic frame for incineration. This framing includes the common held fears of explosions and leaks and the knowledge or awareness of the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993. This chapter will also describe the risk information and materials distributed to the public.

Chapters VI and VII address how the public consumes and perceives these efforts. Chapter six will primarily focus on the believers, the people who find comfort through consuming the risk information and objects. This chapter will reveal the rationale for supporting the incinerator, and it will include important factors—such as knowing employees, trust in the materials, denial, et cetera—

that contribute to this line of thinking. Chapter seven will primarily focus on the skeptics, the people who do not find comfort through consuming the risk information and projects. This chapter will show why these people distrust and disapprove of incineration, and it will include important factors—such as viewing an evacuation as impossible, distrust of the materials, et cetera—that contribute to this skepticism.

Chapter VIII explores the factors influencing perception of the stockpile and incinerator. Some of these influencing factors include the general economic decline of the area and the widespread patriotism of the community. These factors interplay in complex ways with opinions on symbolic safety. Furthermore, many critics succumb to feelings of apathy, fatalism, ignorance, and indifference. Some respondents resolve their fears with the untested belief that they can personally escape a disaster scenario. This chapter demonstrates how important socio-historical conditions can influence social reality.

Chapter IX summarizes and discusses the major findings of this project. It also discusses the limitations and significant implications of the research, including the applied applications for emergency planners. This chapter will conclude by discussing the possibilities for future research.

CHAPTER II

HISTORY

The historical record of Anniston begins with a large void. That void reflects the lack of attention given to the indigenous population that the European invaders largely eradicated. Going back to the war of 1812 and the subsequent Indian Removal Act of the 1830s, whites systematically removed and killed the native Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, and Choctaw people living in the area comprising and surrounding what would become Anniston, Alabama (Garrison 1999). The historical narrative of Anniston begins without reference to the significant populations living in the area. Unfortunately, this omission² largely continues to this day.

The existing historical record of early Anniston begins with the community of Woodstock—a name emerging from the start of the Woodstock Iron Company in northeast Alabama. Woodstock would eventually be renamed Anniston after a local resident's wife, Miss Annie. From its very inception, Anniston was a carefully planned, and subsequently controlled, modern city. The white industrialists establishing Anniston were immensely idealistic and wealthy. Every avenue in the city followed a careful design, all reflecting the xenophobic

² Strong debates and controversy surround this issue. One case in particular surrounds an event in nearby Oxford, Alabama, where a Native burial mound was used to fill in a parking lot of a Sam's Club store. Tensions remain between the need to value and respect the past and the push for economic development.

paranoia and controlling nature of the city's founders: James Noble and Daniel Tyler (Sprayberry 2003).

Following a clear west-east demarcation along Noble Street, the city owners divided the city into two distinct parts: a spatial division that still remains pertinent to current-day social arrangements. From the beginning, the west side of Anniston contained the working class communities, including the numerous factories and iron foundries spewing pollution. Contrasting this, the wealthy owners and professional class lived on the exclusive east side of town, where they could literally look down on the inhabitants of west Anniston from their Victorian mansions spanning the Appalachian foothills. This kind of segregation is not that uncommon in the South, but what makes Anniston so interesting is that the founders carefully outlined *every* geographic detail: even what kind of trees would be planted on which avenue (Sprayberry 2003).

This strict planning combined with the exclusion of outsiders until 1883, made for a purposeful organization of the city; this organization embodied the values of the Old South—a highly formal apartheid based in race and class. The founders were not much different from the planters and slaveholders of the past. They ran the city with stern philosophy based in “charity and paternalism” (Sprayberry 2003:14); dissidents were never permitted, as the Anniston elites feared anyone shaking the status quo. The remnants and consequences resulting from this kind of paternalism and distaste for nonconformity still remain to present day.

Eventually the elites opened Anniston to the outside world. In 1883, fearing pressure from rival companies based in Georgia, the Woodstock owners opened the town to outsiders. The city population doubled within a few months, but the elites continued to strictly control the citizens. Industrialist James Noble continued to dominate local politics, and it was not uncommon for him to personally go through houses in the town to investigate and police the people living in Anniston (Sprayberry 2003).

Perhaps the founders' strongest legacy would be the initial geographic segregation outlined in the city's founding, as Anniston would follow this path for the rest of its development. Anniston's segregation cannot be interpreted as an accident. The segregation began as primarily an issue of economics, but looking back, race cannot be removed from this geographic organization; in fact, over time "race...became the ultimate dividing line in the city" (Sprayberry 2003:36).

Anniston always maintained a significant African American population. The economic opportunities that factory work offered over sharecropping brought in a lot of African American workers from the surrounding communities. Although conditions in Anniston were not ideal for minorities, there were real economic opportunities in the community. West Anniston was not strictly segregated in terms of race at first, but over the decades, poor and rich whites would unite time and time again against their African American neighbors. Racial segregation began as mostly economic in practice, but as time went on, race became an increasingly salient marker of division and exclusion in the community. It was only in the late 1800s that the whites erected physical barriers to separate the racial communities. The pattern of race combined with fear and politics would insulate elite power to contemporary times. Following the 1901 Constitution in Alabama, white elites expanded on the initial groundwork of the city founders. They approached the black community with a combination of paternalism and pity, as they distanced themselves from physical violence through blaming poor whites for much of the racial violence bestowed on the black community. At the same time the elites constructed and subsequently monopolized a system of social control through combining symbolic and economic violence. They engendered cooperation with the poor whites through a continuously communicated narrative of shared white supremacy. But this sense of entitlement was also economic and reciprocal, as they maintained that the best jobs would be exclusive to the white population. Black men could not become professionals; as of 1900, less than two percent of the African American working population was

categorized as professionals. This economic observation does not include women because their labor opportunities were even more limited—almost negligible by contemporary standards. Even with those profound limitations, a considerable middle class established itself in the west side of town, but because of the racial and economic pressures from the white community, maintaining their middle class standard of living remained a tenuous proposition (Sprayberry 2003).

All the poor whites had to do in return was occasionally enforce the developing apartheid with violence, but this was mostly not necessary, as long the “African Americans recognized their “place” in the community, projected an air of civility, and refrained from economic competition...they were allowed to carve out a niche for themselves in the city” (Sprayberry 2003: 57). Overt violence was not generally tolerated because the elite whites recognized that these activities could threaten business. Instead, an uneasy balance of denial and avoidance was established. Describing the power of space and exclusion in the forties and fifties, historian Wayne Flynt wrote:

We lived in East Anniston and that was important. Living in East Anniston determined where you attended church, which group you ran with at Anniston High School, and gave you general standing in the community. True, there were Areas where the two Annistons met—on high school athletic teams, at Baptist Associational youth rallies, and especially dating—but all such occasions provided parents with opportunities for lectures on marrying people of similar backgrounds or how ‘old so-and-so’ was really very nice but somehow not our kind of person. (Sprayberry 2003:36)

The legacy of this spatial organization of race and class remains. Even as white elites did not openly encourage or invite racial violence in their city, violence did occur. Ostensibly, their distaste for physical violence was more that these public events could bring attention to the problems and inequalities of Anniston, thereby threatening the status quo of racial inequality. Many of the elite remained nervous of federal intervention, and because of the inroads of the Civil Rights Movement all through the Deep South and the horrendous 1961 burning of the

Freedom Rider bus in Anniston, the white community slowly began to work with the black community to halt the escalating physical violence in Anniston (Noble 2003).

Polluted Past

While the people of Anniston were able to somewhat calm the more overt forms of physical violence (Noble 2003), the legacy of racial inequality transcends normative definitions of harm. Current and future generations living in Anniston must bear the burden of the toxic practices of those with power in Anniston. Considering the historical legacy of racism in Anniston, it should come as no surprise that these practices were never equally distributed among the population of the city. Time and time again the poor and racial minorities of west Anniston had to suffer from environmental risks and contamination. Considering the profound work of Robert Bullard (1990) on race and environment, one could make a strong argument that the African American community living in west Anniston has continuously suffered from years of environmental racism. Although this project will not directly address this issue, these events should be recognized for their social and historical importance.

According to Bullard (1990), there exists a direct, significant relationship between race and environmental conditions. He concludes that black communities are often targets for polluting industry; in this case, Anniston is no different. This unequal treatment directly reflects the lack of political and economic power in black communities; as Bullard succinctly puts it, they fall in the “path of least resistance” (Bullard 1990:*xiv*), although black communities increasingly organize and fight against this injustice.

Several factors influence the uneven paving of this “path”. First, the lack of resistance from black communities reflects the unequal economic conditions facing African Americans in the U.S. South. However, as Omi and Winant (1994) point out, class does not fully explain racial

construction or racial inequality. In the post-reconstruction “New South³” (Bullard 1990:29), the basic need for employment engendered a lack of regulation, environmental protections, or meaningful resistance to the whims of polluting industry. Anniston and the surrounding areas are strongly pro-business; after all, Alabama is a “right to work state⁴”, and historically speaking, labor conditions have always been tenuous at best. Bullard’s analysis of survey data cites less opposition to polluting industry in economically depressed areas. In a sense, the “New South” remains anti-regulatory and consistently pro-business, as southern communities felt that “jobs were real; environmental risks were unknown” (Bullard 1990:32). Second, economic forces greatly impact the politics of race and ethnicity (Massey and Capoferro 2008; Winders 2008), and political structures contribute to the disproportionate environmental burden on black communities. These environmentally devastated communities collectively lack representation in government, business, and importantly to understanding the environmental pollution in Anniston, environmental protection. This disparity negatively influences black communities, and as a result, time and time again, they disproportionately suffer environmental degradation. Third, political structures directly impact the spatial component of race and environmental inequality. Federal, state, and municipal policies towards infrastructure, government services, zoning, regulation, and enforcement organize and unevenly distribute environmental risks; these geographies comprise a federally created “urban apartheid” (Bullard 1990:7) across the south. Anniston exists as an almost perfect textbook case of this kind of urban planning.

Considering Bullard’s (1990) work, we can connect the racial geography of Anniston with the unequal distribution of pollution and risk, as the geographies of risk parallel existing social inequalities. Again, this project does not focus on these factors in great detail, but they do

³ An illusion that things have significantly changed from the “Old South”, but some argue this simply is not a reality.

⁴ Meaning that workers may be fired for just about anything. It is very difficult for labor to organize in these “right to work” states.

contextualize present day events, and they accordingly affect how people understand the chemical stockpile and incinerator in Anniston.

Monsanto/Solutia

Starting in the 1930s an “industrial coolant” (Grunwald 2002:A01) known as polychlorinated biphenyl (PCBs) was manufactured in two locations in the United States. One of these chemical factories was located in Anniston, Alabama, and this production was truly unfortunate for the citizens surrounding the Monsanto⁵ factory producing the PCBs. In fact, the PCB exposure in Anniston is some of the highest in the nation, and this exposure caused the Environmental Protection Agency to designate Anniston as a Superfund Site (Rubin, Nodvin, Geller, Teague, Holtzclaw, and Felner 2007). For years Monsanto poured “toxic waste into west Anniston creek and dumped millions of pounds of PCBs into oozing open-pit landfills” (Grunwald 2002:A01), all the while knowing the possible toxicity of their product. As late as the 1960s, the Anniston Monsanto plant released “50,000 pounds of PCBs into Snow Creek every year, while burying more than 1 million pounds of PCB-laced waste in its antiquated landfills” (Grunwald 2002:A05); this occurred without observing “even basic industry practices...no catch basins, settling ponds or carbon filters to clean its wastewater. It washed spills straight into its sewers” (Grunwald 2002:A05). A journalist writing for the Washington Times observed:

State officials and plaintiffs’ attorneys were finding astronomical PCB levels in the area: as high as 940 times the federal level of concern in yard soils, 200 times that level in dust inside people’s homes, 2,000 times that level in Monsanto’s drainage ditches. The PCB levels in the air were also too high. And in blood tests, nearly one-third of the residents of the working-class Sweet Valley and Cobbtown neighborhoods near the plant were found to have elevated PCB levels. The communities were declared public health hazards. Near Snow Creek, the state warned...the increased risk of cancer is estimated to be high. (Grunwald 2002: A08)

⁵ Litigation now involves a new company called Solutia Inc. Solutia comes from Monsanto, and at least legally speaking and in terms of liability, the two can be considered connected.

By no coincidence, the production of the highly toxic PCBs took place across town from the country club and expensive homes dotting the hills of east Anniston. This geographic detail is not a fluke or something resulting from mere happenstance. The west side of Anniston has always been the poor side of town, and closely connected to this historical poverty, the west side was primarily the “black side” of town. Observing the connection between health, location, and race, Rubin et al. (2007:388) observe:

The patterns of PCB exposure in Anniston affected African Americans residents disproportionately more than white residents. The former PCB chemical facility and its waste sites were located in West Anniston, the predominately African American and poorer part of the city.

Unfortunately the environmental degradation and risks in Anniston are not limited to the pollution of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), as the city also warehoused tons of highly toxic chemical munitions.

Anniston Army Depot

The U.S. Department of Defense founded the Anniston Army Depot in 1940. Originally named the Army Ordnance Depot, the Depot has continuously adapted to the needs of the U.S. military. The Depot began performing maintenance and repair of combat vehicles in the 1950s, a goal it still maintains to present day. It began storing chemical weapons in the early 60s (U.S. Army 2011).

The Depot provides a significant impact on the local economy. According to the U.S. Army (2011), the Anniston Army Depot contributes about one and a half billion dollars to the local economy every year, and it supports—directly and indirectly—an estimated 25,000 jobs in the Calhoun County area. They maintain a yearly budget of almost 90 million dollars, and this does not include the substantial amount of money put into constructing the incinerator. The

economic impact of the Depot cannot be understated. This contribution became amplified after the closing of Anniston's Fort McClellan.

Stockpile

Chemical and biological weapons have a long history of use, but in the First World War, chemical weapons were used in significant numbers to injure more than a million people and kill 90,000 (Campbell and Ross 1995). Because of the dangers and indiscriminate effects of chemical weapons, the international community created the Geneva Protocol against chemical warfare, but even so, "between 1969 and 1986 there were at least 40 allegations of the use of chemical and biological weapons" (Campbell and Ross 1995:116). That said, in part to the implications of their noted indiscriminate effects, chemical weapons were rarely used past the First World War in the 20th Century, and as a result, large stockpiles amassed across the world, essentially in the name of deterrence (Futrell 2003).

In 1969, the United States halted chemical weapon agent production, accreting a stockpile of around 36,000 tons of chemical agent. With "Public Law 99-145, in the Department of Defense Authorization Act of 1986" (Campbell and Ross 1995:116) the U.S. Congress legislated the destruction of the aging, non-binary chemical weapons, but even so, the United States continued production of the more advanced, binary version of chemical weapons; meanwhile, the Soviets amassed around 200,000 to 300,000 tons of chemical weapons (Campbell and Ross 1995).

Since 1961, Anniston contained a significant portion of the nation's chemical weapon stockpile. At one point, about 9 percent of all the chemical weapons in the country were contained in the 15,000 acres outside west Anniston; this amounted to about 2,254 tons of chemical agents (Bragg and Wilson 2002; Quigley 2005). This massive stockpile of chemical weapons included about five million pounds of Sarin, VX nerve agent, and mustard agent (Bragg

1995; Quigley 2005). Blister agents (like mustard gas) cause degradation of moist bodily tissues; these would include the eyes, throat, and the respiratory tract. Nerve agents attack the nervous system of the body. When exposed, muscles contract uncontrollably, soon followed by violent diarrhea, mucus saturation, vomiting, and death (Sundberg 2007). These chemical weapons are simply lethal and particularly persistent. They vary in form and function, but even when exposed to the elements—and this is by design—some of these weapons may stay viable and lethal for up to 16 weeks (Sundberg 2007). Most of the U.S. stockpile consists of nerve and blister agents, and these are particularly persistent; things like weather, vegetation, elevation, and time modify their lethality and containment (Sundberg 2007), and given an accident in a populated area, decontamination would be very difficult. These weapons were stored near a city consisting of over 24,000 people and surrounded by 100,000 more people living in the greater Calhoun County area—a relatively large population by most reasonable measures (Murphy 2003).

Treaty

To alleviate the international threat of chemical weapons, the Chemical Weapons Convention was held in 1993. Under the agreements signed in the convention, the United States and the cosigning 130 nations all agreed “that each party would control its stockpile of existing weapons and never use or prepare to use such weapons for military purposes...[and to] take measures to destroy stockpiles of chemical weapons home and abroad, as well as any facilities used to manufacture such weapons” (Quigley 2005:2), and according to the convention, this all was to happen before the year 2007 (Quigley 2005).

To meet this demanding deadline, the United States Army began the long process of disposing its sizeable chemical weapon stockpile in 1983 (Futrell 2003). To accomplish this goal, the Army decided that incinerating the chemical stockpiles would be the best tactic to eliminate these weapons and fulfill the requirements of the Chemical Weapons Convention. Incineration

appealed to the Army because it would not require risky transportation of the chemical weapons, and they felt that the financial costs of incineration could remain reasonable. The Army originally chose to build chemical incinerators at nine locales in the United States: Umatilla Army Depot in Oregon, Tooele Army Depot in Utah, Pueblo Depot Activity in Colorado, Newport Army Ammunition Plant in Indiana, Pine Bluff Arsenal in Arkansas, Blue Grass Army Depot in Kentucky, Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland, Johnston Island in the Pacific, and the Anniston Army Depot in Alabama (Campbell and Ross 1995).

Incinerator

Due to the U.S. obligations in the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993, the U.S. Army decided to construct an incinerator to dispose of the sizeable chemical weapon stockpile amassed in west Anniston. The military had previously disposed of chemical weapons through other, less sophisticated means; these include (Chemical Materials Agency 2011:1) “ocean dumping, open-pit burning, and land burials”.

The process of disposing chemical munitions is complicated because the weapons take several forms: mines, shells, bombs, rockets, et cetera (Futrell 2003). In particular, the disposing of chemical rockets is very complicated because the rockets themselves are intricate in composition (Campbell and Ross 1995; Futrell 2003); rockets have multiple, highly volatile segments including agent, propellants, fuses, and charges. Incinerating these complicated weapons becomes especially risky because incineration requires that “explosives and propellants be separated from the chemical agent prior to destruction” (Futrell 2003:458). These additional steps increase the chances for error and bring the distinct possibility of a “catastrophic accident” (Futrell 2003:458). According to the Chemical Materials Agency (2011), the Anniston Chemical Agent Disposal Facility (ANCDF) utilizes a seven-step process to account for these dangers. These steps include massive, reinforced concrete walls, cascading ventilation, carbon filtering,

robotic controls, and excessive incinerating temperatures of both the weapons materiel and the incinerated exhaust.

Chapter Summary

As seen from this brief overview, race and class inequality are woven into the fabric of Anniston, and the community has a long history with environmental contamination, technological risk, and military presence. All of these factors are interrelated in complex ways that have shaped the town's past, present, and future. For the purposes of this research, the primary concern is to better understand how weapons incineration became a reality in Anniston. Specifically, this research seeks to understand how governmental and military organizations defined issues of risk and safety in terms of incineration, how they communicated that information to the public, and how the public made sense of the information. The next chapter reviews relevant literature that may help answer these questions.

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociologists and other social scientists began to systematically study disasters in the years after World War II. Since that time, competing perspectives have emerged in terms of how disasters should be defined and what should be the primary focus of research. In this chapter, two broad perspectives will be discussed: the traditional view and the social constructionist approach. The traditional view tends to regard disasters as external events that impose themselves upon a social system, while social constructionists typically view disasters as socially defined phenomena. With its emphasis on symbolic safety, this study obviously draws more heavily upon the social constructionist perspective, but it is important to also consider the traditional view to better understand how sociological thinking about disasters has changed and evolved over the past several decades.

Traditional Disasters

The traditional paradigm of disaster research primarily focuses on the impact of disasters on communities and how organizations respond to such events. This paradigmatic focus emerges from both the applied and theoretical origins of traditional disaster research (Tierney 2007; Webb 2007). Theoretically, the traditional view drew upon structural functionalism which saw society as a complex system akin to a living organism. From a research perspective, the goal was to see how the system would respond to extreme environmental jolts or disruptions. From an

applied perspective, the objective was to produce research findings that would improve the way organizations and communities prepare for and respond to future events.

Contrary to popular thinking, early disaster studies found that rather than breaking down into panic, chaos, and social disorganization, societies are often resilient in the face of large-scale natural disasters (Fritz 1961; Kreps 1984). Indeed, they identified numerous misconceptions or myths of human response to disaster (Quarantelli 1960; Fritz 1961; Johnson 1987). At the forefront of disaster mythology were the established but problematic narratives of disaster panic, dependency, and the need to control unruly civilian populations (Quarantelli 1960). Early researchers sought to debunk these myths and replaced them with an alternative view of the post-disaster environment, one that emphasized functional adaptation, shared consensus, and cooperation. The pro-social response to disasters was so pronounced that it led early researchers to use the term “therapeutic community” to describe what happens in the aftermath of a disaster (Fritz 1961; Quarantelli and Dynes 1977; Webb 2007).

However, the traditional view has some significant shortcomings. For example, with its strong functionalist bias, questions of power and conflict remain largely marginalized. With the funding for early disaster research coming from military sources, researchers focused largely on practical questions of interest to the funders (Quarantelli 1960; Fritz 1961; Webb 2007). In particular, they sought to document typical civilian behavior, identify response challenges, and make recommendations for improving future responses. They were far less concerned, then, with issues of power and social inequality (Tierney 2007).

Yet, societal inequalities impact every aspect of disaster phenomena. This basic point is the crux of the “vulnerabilities” paradigm. It assumes that social inequality is a prominent feature of all societies, though societies differ in terms of their primary basis of stratification (e.g., race, class, gender, or age). It also assumes that pre-existing social inequalities will shape people’s

exposure to natural and technological hazards in the first place, and they will impact people's experiences in the post-disaster time period. Simply put, on the basis of prevailing social inequalities, disasters create winners and losers (Bullard 1990; Fothergill 1996; Phillips 1996; Dash, Peacock, and Morrow 1997; Klienenberg 2002; Stallings 2002; Fothergill and Peek 2004).

Additionally, subsequent researchers, particularly those from environmental sociology, have suggested that the traditional view overemphasizes the therapeutic effects of disasters. Technological disasters, they argue, tend instead to create what they call "corrosive communities" (Couch and Kroll-Smith 1985; Cuthbertson and Nigg 1987; Freudenburg 1997; Gill and Picou 1998; Picou, Marshall, and Gill 2004). These corrosive technological events differ from natural events in that they often cause conflict among members of the community; they do not typically follow the same sequential stages as a natural disaster (e.g., preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation); and people often disagree on what has happened, what should be done about it, and who is to blame (Couch and Kroll-Smith 1985; Picou, Marshall, and Gill 2004).

The Social Constructionist Approach

The ambiguity and lack of consensus among community members in the wake of technological crises highlights an important point about disasters that is particularly relevant to this study—namely, that disasters are socially constructed phenomena. Although they certainly have objective features (e.g., physical destruction, loss of life, and financial costs), disasters also have a subjective side. Individual and organizational actors differ in terms of how they perceive risk; what is considered to be a disaster by some is viewed as unproblematic by others; and safety or mitigation measures advocated by some are staunchly opposed by others.

In 1966, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote *The Social Construction of Reality*. Within this profoundly influential work, they argue that reality is not simply objective, that is, people negotiate social reality through interaction. But key to this interaction, people mistake or

simply assume that experienced reality is rather objective and concrete. Reality is “simply there, as self-evident and compelling facticity” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:23), and this seemingly objective reality comes about through a sociological process of language, externalization, objectification, and institutional reification.

Robert Stallings (1990) skillfully places the study of risk within the social constructionist tradition. This paradigmatic approach requires that the researcher understand the significant role of social organization in the production, filtration, and distribution of risks. This basic understanding of the sociology of risk addresses two fundamental questions: first, who is involved in the risk, and two, what processes produce risk (Stallings 1990).

The media are heavily implicated in the production and consumption of risk. Media sources do not so much influence or dictate what people say, but what they do is essentially set the topic for discussion; in a sense, “the reality of risk for most of us exists mainly in images created by others” (Stallings 1990:81); that is, the media “frame” how people think about a topic (Stallings 1990).

Even so, some frames work and others simply fail. Key to this is “the maintaining of the singularity of an incident” or the role of “disownership” (Stallings 1990:88). Certain stories resonate within a public, and in the social construction of risk, isolated events do not fare well. Successful narratives fit a pattern; they make sense against the established narrative background. As interpretation usually follows an event, having an established pattern helps the public “reinterpret” (Stallings 1990:89) the event against competing narratives that may not stay consistent with the event’s history. According to Stallings (1990), winning accounts communicate similarity of events. Further, these claims often focus on a single issue—something

simple and clearly linked to a chain of responsibility. This often falls on individuals⁶, as other—perhaps more complex—causes do not seem to resonate within the American public.

Addressing the social construction of risk, we can see how context greatly influences the interpretation of danger (Stallings 1995). In a sense, the very reality of an event is subject to the organizations involved in the creation of an event and its very interpretation.

Fantasy Documents

Discussing organizational planning and failure, Lee Clarke addresses the role of fantasy in complex and often risky organizations. As Clarke (1999) writes, in the world of complex organizations, planning remains omnipresent. In order to function and succeed at what ever they do, organizations will attempt to plan for every conceivable possibility. One could even say that planning is normal, but here Clarke makes an interesting distinction: not all planning is the same.

Not all planning is the same because we live in a world with limited information. According to Clarke (1999), organizational officials often do not know the limits of their own abilities, power, knowledge, and foresight. This unfortunate reality becomes problematic when considering the possibility for organizational failure and disaster (Clarke and Perrow 1996). Addressing the possibility of organizational failure, organizations will plan for contingencies, but returning to my earlier statement, not all plans are the same. For instance, sometimes plans do not adequately address the dangers inherent in complex systems. “In particular, some plans have so little instrumental utility in them that they warrant the label fantasy documents” (Clarke 1999:3). These *fantasy documents* have some interesting qualities.

First, as the name clearly indicates, they are fantastic in nature and design. Fantasy documents make people believe in the fantastic through offering the illusion of both safety and

⁶ With public organizations, we will see this often with the “least powerful irresponsible individuals” Stallings (1990:91).

competency. Shockingly, even to the people creating these fantasies, they “are neither wholly believed nor disbelieved” (Clarke and Perrow 1996:1041). They are not wholly believed nor disbelieved because they accept “the most benign assumptions about the environment” (Clarke and Perrow 1996:1053), and lack any check on reality, thereby normalizing danger and offering an illusion of control. These fantasy documents erroneously confirm to their intended audience—and importantly the public—that organizational officials can ensure that “everything will work right the first time, that every contingency is known and prepared for” (Clarke and Perrow 1996:1041). In essence, they engage the imagination. When constructed well, they:

Describe the scenery, necessarily neglecting much as they construct the organizational stage upon which the fantasy will presumably work itself out. Fantasy documents detail the timing of assault, of reaction, and of recovery: when the disaster will strike, and how, and when—never if—the all clear will sound. (Clarke and Perrow 1996:1053)

These imaginative scenarios are essentially dreams created from the promised credibility of the organizations producing them (Clarke and Perrow 1996).

Second, they imbue organizations with power. Fantasy documents connect and reinforce power through credibility. Some fantasy documents work as “forms of rhetoric, tools designed to convince audiences that they ought to believe what an organizations says” (Clarke 1999:3). This is done, in part, to rationalize and justify the growing risk embedded in contemporary organizational systems and society. These “fantasy documents normalize danger by allowing organizations and experts to claim that the problems are under control” (Clarke and Perrow 1996:1055). Often, these plans will work to silence critics and shore up power. Citing Murray Edelman, Clarke (1999:141) writes “policies and plans may fail, or make no difference at all, but the words are palliative because they offer the public soothing solutions to difficult problems”. This “encourages a quiescent stand in the face of problems and grievances that might otherwise invite resistance” (Clarke 1999:145).

Fantasy Documents and Incineration in Anniston

Clarke's notion of organizational planning and the production of fantasy documents is clearly applicable to the Anniston case. We can see this demonstrated through in the ineffective but admirable opposition to incineration in Anniston. Despite the best efforts from highly organized and outspoken opposition groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Kentucky Environmental Foundation, the Chemical Weapons Working Group, the Alabama Chapter of the Sierra Club, the Coosa River Basin Initiative, Serving Alabama's Future Environment, and The Families Concerned About Nerve Gas Incineration, numerous editorials opposing incineration in the local paper the *Anniston Star*, and even forthright hesitancy expressed from Senator Richard Shelby, incineration became a reality in Anniston (Laska 2001; Chemical Weapons Working Group 2007).

How did incineration become a reality? As with other risky organizations, the U.S. Army and Department of Defense engaged the public's imagination through the creation and enactment of fantasy documents. A case in point is the contingency plans addressing a possible emergency at the chemical incinerator in Anniston, Alabama. Not unlike plans from other risky organizations, the plans presented to handle a disaster in Anniston incinerator fail to address reality and fall into Clarke's (1999:3) astute criteria of "fantasy documents".

As part of the federally mandated Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Project (CSEPP), emergency plans were developed to address an emergency at the Anniston Army Depot (Laska 2001). These plans provided "emergency planning materials, including evacuation maps, siren patterns and schedules, and detailed instructions regarding what to do in the event of a chemical emergency" (Laska 2001:4). The importance of these plans becomes acute when one considers that by some estimates, at least 30,000 people live within the "zone of danger" (Laska 2001:3). Even so, probabilities of risk in this case are difficult to estimate. As of 2001,

Many in the area have no idea in what zone they live, no idea what siren tone signals a chemical accident, or no home-sheltering kits in their homes or businesses. Many persons also do not have any idea of what evacuation routes to use, if any. (Laska 2001:86)

Following the spirit of other fantasy documents, Laska (2001:6) writes of the Anniston area plans, “if an emergency were to occur, it would likely be large, overwhelming the best-laid community-based plans...the area surrounding the Anniston Army Depot is not prepared for a chemical emergency”. Sadly, evacuation is not even a possibility for many living near the incinerator, as they will have to shelter in place—a risky and tentative proposition at best (Laska 2001). In a 2001 press release, an organization opposing incineration released the following quote from an activist challenging incineration in Anniston:

I’m sure it’ll be just fine with ADEM (Alabama Department of Environmental Management) if in the case of an emergency release of nerve agent, we simply close our windows, turn off our central air, and hold our breath, for that is exactly what the Army told us to do. (CWWG 2007)

The probable failure of these plans does not result from a lack of competency, preparation, or commitment from the government and military (Clarke and Perrow 1996). Instead, organizational failure comes directly from “the logic required of our risky systems” (Clarke and Perrow 1996:1053). In a real sense, if a catastrophic failure were to occur in Anniston, horrific results would be simply inevitable. But this is not to say that organizations knowingly lie to the public and themselves. According to Clarke, organizations believe their own plans. Although these plans are “deceptive in their effects” (Clarke 1999:141), they are not deceptive in their creation. He concludes “organizations don’t know enough to create effective plans, so how could they know enough to lie and cover up?” (Clarke 1999:141).

Fantasy Objects

As can be seen in the previous discussion, Clarke’s concept of fantasy documents helps us understand the Anniston case. However, it does not fully capture the social construction of

risk and symbolic safety around the incinerator. To gain a more in-depth understanding of how incineration became reality, this study will move beyond fantasy documents and also consider “fantasy objects.” These are material products, including plans that are more visible and tangible than documents, that shape people’s perceptions of risk and provide a physical embodiment of symbolic safety. To understand how organizations use objects to enact fantasy and endow fantasy documents with credibility, it will be useful to briefly discuss the issue of postmodern production.

Considering postmodern production, we can see how organizations do not just produce fantasy documents. In fact, they produce a whole gambit of fantasy objects to justify and legitimate those in power. So what are fantasy objects?

Fantasy objects are physical, tangible items that work to accomplish all the goals of fantasy documents. Returning to Clarke and Perrow’s (1996:1041) observation that fantasy documents “are neither wholly believe nor disbelieved”, the same can be said about fantasy objects. For example, in the event of an emergency chemical release in Anniston, and this is assuming the sensors would successfully detect a chemical leak, Bragg and Wilson (2002:2) write:

The 35,000 people who live in within nine miles are expected to have only 8 to 15 minutes to evacuate. For those who cannot get away quickly the plan is simple. They have been told to go inside, seal a room with duct tape and plastic sheeting and wait.

Now, if it is even possible to make a room airtight with all the time and tape in the world, this tactic, under the pressures of impending doom, seems unlikely for most people—especially those with special needs or even mild difficulties with pressure. Describing this plan, elderly Anniston resident Hattie Howze tells reporters that she has trouble “closing the drapes” (Bragg and Wilson 2002:5), and about the incinerator, “I fear it...but you just have to trust the people who are supposed to know” (Bragg and Wilson 2002:5).

To save their lives, most people living in communities surrounding the incinerator—the “PAZ” as it is called (Calhoun Emergency Management Agency 2008), can obtain a shelter-in-place kit consisting of a 10’ X 25’ roll of plastic sheeting, a roll of duct tape, a pair of scissors, and an instructional video (Murphy 2003). People living very close to the incinerator—the so-called “pink zone” (Calhoun EMA 2008), are eligible for protective hoods, portable air room cleaners, and shelter-in-place kits, and people living in between these areas of the pink zone and PAZ—the “IRZ” (Calhoun EMA 2008) as it is called, can get a portable air room cleaner and a shelter in place kit from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Calhoun EMA 2008).

I contend these objects work only in the most *ideal* of conditions, and this is assuming that if used properly, these objects would perform as advertised. Exactly as with fantasy documents, to believe in these objects, one must accept “the most benign assumptions about the environment” (Clarke and Perrow 1996:1053) because all these objects: the tape, air cleaners, sirens, scissors, hoods, and plastic sheeting lack any kind of meaningful reality check—we do not know how they will work until a catastrophe happens, and that may very well be disastrous for everyone in the immediate area. So with just a little imagination and critical thought, it is easy to see how these objects, and the people consuming these objects for that matter, might fail under chaotic conditions. The possibilities are painful to imagine.

As with all postmodern production, these fantasy objects are not valued or consumed for their reality or utility; what matters in terms of consumption is the symbolism of the item. These fantasy objects allow people to seek and acquire a simulacrum of the real, not the real itself (Baudrillard 1990). In his (1981) classic *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard outlines the mechanics of power in postmodern society. Contrasting a modern, more concrete sense of reality, Baudrillard claims that in the postmodern era, the proliferation of hyperreality⁷ maintains

⁷ Hyperreality coming from Baudrillard’s three orders of simulation: the first order being a clear copy of reality; the second order being indistinguishable from reality; the third order being not

that power is no longer obtainable, but instead, power becomes a simulation—that is, those in power practice the effects of power on a mass scale, even though they can no longer create, restrict, or restrain it. It is a floating signifier; it remains free. Exercised power dissolves into the practice of maintaining the illusion of control; it becomes a “hallucination” (Baudrillard 1981:23). Describing this phenomenon, he writes, “power is in essence no longer present except to conceal that there is no more power” (Baudrillard 1981:26). However, the illusion of power takes effort, energy, and maintenance. The powerful must insert the possibility of the real and clearly referential whenever possible to maintain the illusion of power. Therefore, it is in the interest of those in power to confirm our worst fears and keep the public in a continual state of fear; the powerful “plays at the real, plays at crisis, plays at remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, and political states” (Baudrillard 1981:22).

To this end, those in power prefer the clear language of crisis. According to Baudrillard (1981), crisis becomes the vehicle to answer desire—a mechanism to reengage and confirm the illusive reality principle⁸. “Take your desires for reality! Can [sic] be understood as the ultimate slogan of power since in a non-referential world, even the confusion of the reality principle and the principle of desire is less dangerous than contagious hyperreality” (Baudrillard 1981:22). So through crisis, power reinstates the reality principle and confirms the real; hyperreality dissipates accordingly, and power temporarily remains sound in belief, practice, and perhaps ironically, reality. In the case of Anniston, the crisis clearly comes from the deteriorating stockpile of weapons. Amazingly, no one contests this narrative, and the opportunity for fantasy emerges from this seemingly solid foundation in reality. For power to remain sound and legitimate

bound in reality and producing its own reality. Hyperreality works on this third order of simulation (Lane 2000).

⁸ The Reality Principle is the possibility of real, tangible, undeniable phenomena in social reality. In a sense, the reality principle is what the postmodern period lost. Comparable to both alienation and anomie from Marx, Durkheim, and Merton, postmodern society rarely connects to the tangible and undeniable. Everything has become lost, deniable, and in a sense, unreal: this is what Baudrillard (1981:1) calls “the desert of the real itself”.

though, the fantasy must remain real, and here we can see the role of fantasy in creating, maintaining, and possibly destroying power.

In postmodern times, the true danger to power is simulation. The possibility of a concrete, obtainable reality remains power's only defense against simulation. As Baudrillard (1981:22) states of this, to those in power, "it is a question of life and death. But it is too late", and it is too late because production is no longer real. "What every society looks for in continuing to produce, and to over-produce, is to restore the real that escapes it" (Baudrillard 1981:23), but instead, society's "material production is that of the hyperreal itself". It seems that all of postmodern production seeks to reinstate the reality principle, but consequently, it is deemed to ultimately fail.

To illustrate this point, Baudrillard extends Marx's analysis of capitalism and alienation by connecting the "cargo myth of Melanesian natives" (Lane 2000) with postmodern production and consumption. Baudrillard views these cargo cults as analogous to our society and its ultimately fruitless anticipation for fulfillment through voracious consumption. In this example of the cargo cults, the natives associated—not fully understanding why—cargo planes with the wealth and prosperity of the white imperialists. So to achieve their own prosperity from the cargo planes, the native people constructed "a simulacrum of an aeroplane to attract these objects...likewise, the modern consumer...sets in place a whole array of sham objects, of characteristic signs of happiness, and then waits" (Lane 2000:70). In the same way as the Melanesian natives, postmodern society associates—again, not fully understanding why—media messages of the real, and postmodern societies accordingly seek and acquire a simulacrum of what they want but will never have: the real. We buy the convertible car seeking attractiveness; we buy the latest electronic gadgets to become assertive and confident in business; we buy the movie with the funny cartoon characters to relate to our children; all this gets us no closer to the real, but as we begin to realize this, we never challenge the association: only the object itself. To

the disillusioned, the problem must be an inferior product, and then the cycle begins anew. So in postmodern production, importantly, emphasis becomes placed on the symbolism of the product itself; it is no longer the physical utility of an object.

Concerning those in power, according to Baudrillard (1981), power remains resiliently committed to itself and to the fulfillment of its own fantasy. As mentioned earlier, power must combat hyperreality through the production and recreation of the real that escapes postmodern society. This begs the question, how can power reinstate the real, and how does this relate to production?

Power reinstates the real through producing reality—the clearest example of reality comes from the discourse of crisis, disaster, and risk. When believable and successfully framed as credible, danger quickly provides the powerful an element of reality, and here is where simulation becomes so dangerous. Simulation undermines the reality principle and erodes the entire foundation supporting the production of risk. Authority does not seek to simulate, as the threat is real to them. “To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have” (Baudrillard 1981:3). Therefore, authority must disavow simulation and amplify any—fabricated or not—reality of risk. “Simulation threatens the difference between the true and the false, the real and the imaginary” (Baudrillard 1981:3). For power to exist, the fantasy must remain real, and it can remain real through “pretending, or dissimulating” (Baudrillard 1981:3) because this “leaves the principle of reality intact” (Baudrillard 1981:3). We can now see how power must keep the fantasy going. This manifests in the production of a fantasy, and from this viewpoint, we can begin to see power’s amusing and fascinating world of make-believe. Safety becomes the object of desire, and as with the narrative of the cargo cults, people acquire these products and wait for the real to deliver. But this never will happen.

Earning the trust of the public is exactly what these objects are supposed to do; meanwhile control and safety remain an unobtainable illusion. As with the fantasy documents, these items essentially help sell the narrative of control; they set the stage for competency and legitimacy in organizations. They erroneously confirm to their audience that organizational officials have answers—that they can engage in the discourse of crisis and realistically answer the desire for safety—that is, the desire for something real. This silences critics; to question the fantasy is to also question the concrete fantasy objects, and that can be ridiculed. Challenging these items is nearly impossible, and if someone were to question the entire chain of events, their energy would—as with other criticisms of postmodern production, attach to the fantasy object, not the risky system endangering people. So when a disaster occurs, no one will punish the organizations that created the risk in the first place. Instead, people will criticize the objects⁹. Further, these objects demonstrate to concerned citizens that organizations are serious about safety—that they have taken real steps to provide security for the citizenry; this understandably soothes anxiety and offers people a false security.

Chapter Summary

As shown in this chapter, social scientific thinking about disasters has dramatically changed since the 1950s. Early research was dominated by a functionalist bias that viewed society as a social system and disasters as external events that impose themselves on and cause changes to the system. More recently, researchers have begun focusing on issues of power and social inequality, noting that disasters are not randomly or evenly distributed across society. Rather, some groups are more exposed to and impacted by natural and technological hazards. Of most relevance to this study is the social constructionist perspective, which argues that hazards and disasters only exist when people define them as such. As a result, researchers now aim to

⁹ Flooding resulting from hurricane Katrina was blamed on failed levies in New Orleans, for example. Or one could look at the recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico for another good illustration of this phenomenon.

describe the role of powerful organizations in shaping people's perceptions of risk and safety. This research applies that approach to understanding the efforts of governmental and military organizations to convince the public that incineration was safe for Anniston. Before discussing the findings, however, the next chapter describes the methodology that was employed to answer these important questions.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This project utilizes two primary research methods. First, I conducted a series of qualitative interviews (n =25) in Anniston, Alabama. These interviews offer personal accounts of those living and working near the chemical weapons incinerator, and they serve as my main source of data. Second, I also incorporated an *autoethnographic* element to the research (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). To be specific, I utilized elements of a “*reflexive ethnography*” due to my familiarity with the local culture and my deep ties to the community. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000:740) describe it:

In reflexive ethnographies, the researcher’s personal experience becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study...the researcher’s experience is actually studied along with other participants, to confessional tales where the researcher’s experiences of doing the study become the focus of investigation.

This autoethnographic element helped me contextualize, organize, and ultimately make sense of these different sources of data. It permeated the entire project while adding important descriptive detail. This methodological approach provided data largely unattainable to an outsider. Now, some may find this approach objectionable as it could bias or influence findings, but having an inside understanding may also provide contextualization absent from other research methods. Lived experience can provide unique data. My strong roots in the area gave me an emic or insider’s perspective, which facilitated entrée into the setting, sensitized me to key issues and concerns, and helped me better understand the perspectives of the participants in the research

(Spradley1980; Lofland and Lofland 1995). This kind of autoethnographic detail demands immersion in the field, while also embracing a certain amount of subjectivity; autoethnographic accounts require the researcher to become a connected, longstanding membership to the community of interest (Emerson 2001). Maintaining that connection served in my research efforts to comfort research participants into talking frankly about their experiences. Introducing myself as a “military brat” worked to open many doors in the interviewing process, and this comforting information also greatly contributed to participants recommending other people for participation in this project. Cognizant of the closing of Fort McClellan, many people were hesitant to openly criticize the Army or happenings at the Anniston Army Depot. Communicating my insider status did well to address potential discomfort in the participants.

Sampling

Adult residents living in the greater Calhoun County area composed the subject population for this study. I am interested in these people because they have a stake in the outcomes of chemical incineration. Living so close to the Anniston incinerator, these stakeholders are essentially invested in the long-term outcome of events in the community. In terms of research data, these stakeholders have a close social proximity to the geographic locale—thereby possessing unique knowledge of the events and happenings occurring near incineration. This experiential data is invaluable to this study, and only this population can provide this kind of information.

Participants for this research came from a purposive, non-probability snowball sampling method (Babbie 2007). Participants were selected for inclusion in the study because they had relevant knowledge of the incinerator and could provide in-depth information on how risk and safety information have been presented to the public. Individual participants needed only to live in the Anniston area, and following the snowball sampling method, participating individuals suggested additional research participants. Following this method, research informants provided

access and contacts to additional research participants.

The sample began with people I knew from living in the area for years. The first wave of respondents was primarily comprised of former coworkers, friends, and acquaintances from my past. After interviewing, these participants informally referred me to other people they thought I would find interesting. These people were often coworkers and family members of the respondents, but this was not always the case.

Often respondents would initially tell me that they knew very little about the topic, and they suggested that I talk to someone “in the know”. This was usually someone working at the Depot. I typically countered this by explaining that everyone has important information regarding the topic, and although it would be good to talk to people more technically knowledgeable, I was interested in everyday knowledge of the incinerator. This hesitancy of people to talk with me could relate to the perception that the stockpile and incinerator were complex topics; that the incinerator was highly technical and should be left to those with expertise on the subject—like the military. I resolved this issue by assuring the respondents that they knew something valuable, and many respondents assumed I knew a lot about the stockpile and incinerator anyway, so people began talking to me without too much trepidation.

I met with participants in a place and time of their choosing, and this varied widely from homes to fast food restaurants. It worked in my favor to interview people in areas with high visibility. Although I will not mention these businesses out of concerns for confidentiality, people began talking about my presence at these locations, and this interest contributed to referrals for more interviews.

The sample consisted of twenty-five people. All the participants worked or lived relatively close to the incinerator and stockpile. Typical of a military community, these people moved fairly often, and their connections to the military and Depot were quite complex. This is a transient group of people, and many of them have family working for the military.

The research participants varied considerably by a few factors. My youngest respondents

were in their late teens, while the most senior participant was in her eighties. The sample also varied greatly in amounts of education. This varied from no high school education all the way to professional degrees. The sample was almost perfectly split between women and men, and although difficult to cleanly quantify, a slight majority of the sample were more positive and supportive of the incinerator.

Overall, the weaknesses of the sample reflect my own background in the area. As compared to the general population, the respondents typically had more formal education, and the sample was mostly white. This was in part due to the nature of non-probability sampling, but this limitation should not affect the quality of information coming out of the interviews. I had arranged for more interviews to be conducted, but this became exceedingly difficult because of the logistics of traveling so far under a limited budget of money and time. Regardless of logistical limitations, I achieved saturation in the data, and I am satisfied with this group of research participants.

In addition to this snowball sample, I also contacted and interviewed the spokesperson for the incinerator. I contacted him through the United States Army Chemical Materials Agency. I interviewed him in his official capacity as the person of contact for the incinerator complex, and he was very cooperative with helping me understand and communicate the official line of the incinerator. He also provided me with additional information and resources to aid in my research; this included a calendar, brochures, and other information about incineration. All participants were assigned a pseudonym, and one person actually produced their own pseudonym for this project.

Interviews

The main portion of the research project consists of a series of in-depth, qualitative interviews. Because these interviews are grounded in the experiences and context of those living near (within the boundaries of Calhoun County area) the storage and incineration of chemical

weapons at Anniston, Alabama, I traveled there to locate and contact people living and working in the vicinity of the chemical incinerator. In this effort, early participants came directly from my extensive personal contacts, as I lived in this community for over a decade and still maintain friendships and have family in the Anniston area.

Because rapport is so important in qualitative research, participation for this study came initially through the use of “gatekeepers” (Creswell 1998:117). A gatekeeper is “the initial contact for the researcher and leads the researcher to other informants” (Creswell 1998:117). A gatekeeper has special localized knowledge, and he or she is imperative to finding, and importantly, establishing rapport with research participants. A gatekeeper becomes the first step in constructing a “snowball or chain sample” (Creswell 1998:119). This non-probability sampling method “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich” (Creswell 1998:119). Since there is no intention to generalize to a larger population, this sampling process was appropriate for this study. I contacted these gatekeepers through a personal phone call. The recruitment narrative included a brief description of the research project followed with a request for participation.

Active involvement remained relatively short— less than two hours—for each interview session. Some interviews were short due to the constraints of the individuals I interviewed. Some were a little longer, but most went approximately one hour in length. Each participant was only interviewed once. A waiver for signed informed consent was requested and subsequently approved, as the signed form would be the only document linking the participant to the study. Solicitation for participation and the actual interview sessions occurred between the months of June 2010 and August 2011. All interview data were gathered in this twelve-month window.

I asked each participant to participate in a brief (2 hours or less) *semi-structured* (Babbie

2007) interview¹⁰ at a location and time of their choosing. This semi-structured or *semistandardized interview*:

Involves the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and special topics. These questions are typically asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewers are allowed freedom to digress; that is, the interviewers are permitted (in fact, expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared standardized questions. (Berg 2004:81)

The accommodating nature of a *semistandardized interview schedule* engenders a more natural social exchange where the research participants feel more comfortable, and the interviewer retains the methodological freedom to pursue any emerging narrative themes. This strategy enables indirect and nuanced questioning. Utilizing a *semistandardized interview*, I felt that I could better access emerging narrative themes without interjecting or directing the data; again, a flexible methodology encourages a more active participation and a more egalitarian relationship between the research participant and myself. This research relationship follows a more *feminist* approach—encouraging collaborative knowledge making and an attentive focus on voice (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Padgett 2004). All the participants agreed to let me electronically record the audio from our interviews, and I subsequently took the recordings and transcribed the interviews *verbatim*; these transcripts are the bulk of my research data. I also took handwritten notes during the interview process. Taking notes during these interviews helped me maintain focus during our conversations, and it permitted me another layer of description for later analysis. Once the interviews were completed, I organized the transcribed data using a *grounded theory* (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Babbie 2007) approach.

¹⁰ See Interview Schedule in Appendix.

Data Analysis

Naturalistic Inquiry and Issues of Reliability and Validity

This project employs a social constructionist position. Thus, rather than emphasizing reliability and validity, its primary consideration is establishing “trustworthiness” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004:460). This encompasses “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability”, or as Norman Denzin puts it, “a good constructionist interpretation is based on purposive sampling, a grounded theory, inductive data analysis, and idiographic interpretations” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004:460); this research follows these guidelines.

Data Analysis for Interviews

Once I completed interviewing the research participants, I transcribed the conversations for analysis. To analyze the material, I used an inductive approach much like the *grounded theory* method. The grounded theory method is, “an iterative process by which the analyst becomes more and more ‘grounded’ in the data and develops increasingly richer concepts and models of how the phenomenon being studied really works” (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:783). Although this project does build from the grounded theory method, theory and the disaster literature informed the process of coding and organizing themes. This process does not strictly follow the grounded theory method. I entered this project with some expectations of what I would find, and I acknowledge this bias. However, I attempted to approach the data with an open mind, and because of this, several unique themes came rather unexpectedly from the data. My theoretical leanings did sensitize me to themes in the data, but this did not inhibit the end analysis.

My strategy contained a few key stages. First, I gathered the printed transcripts and read over the material for quite some time. Reading the interview transcripts, I noted what caught my

attention—paying attention to both my understanding of what is pertinent from the literature and more importantly, what the participants felt, emphasized, or communicated as most significant. Once those themes became apparent, I scoured the transcripts to collect what quotes applied to those key themes, and I then organized the excerpts to make the most logical sense and fit a cohesive, narrative presentation. I finally went back through the transcripts to find cases that contradicted or challenged my organization. I then worked to resolve these differences and produce a document that best represents the complexity of this subject matter. Several themes developed deductively from the literature, but several themes emerged from the interviews previously unseen. This flexibility speaks to the merit of a semistandardized interview and the grounded theory method.

Chapter Summary

As described in this chapter, this research employed a qualitative methodology that involved interviews and autoethnography. The primary objectives of the research were to describe how officials defined issues of risk and safety around the incinerator and to better understand how members of the public have responded to those efforts. Drawing primarily upon the interviews and also from my own experiences, the next four chapters provide some answers to these questions.

CHAPTER V

SELLING SYMBOLIC SAFETY: OFFICIAL DEFINITIONS OF RISK AND SAFETY IN ANNISTON

This chapter examines organizationally produced symbolic safety. Symbolic safety is a social construction. It is an attempt to comfort people through the communication of official definitions of risk. People in power promote these definitions to appease and calm the public. Communicating symbolic safety is an effort to create and maintain the impression that things are under control—that the social order remains securely in place, and that oppositional thoughts are unmerited, illegitimate, and ultimately problematic.

In this instance, the Anniston incinerator complex and associated organizations accomplished this through two tactics: on one hand, the Anniston Army Depot and incinerator offered the surrounding public little transparency. This kind of selective secrecy was obviously justified for national security reasons, but obfuscation of internal information—including institutional identity, demarcation, and transparency—worked to confuse the ownership of risk; that is, participants in the study generally did not meaningfully distinguish between the Depot, incinerator, Westinghouse, Calhoun County, or the Department of Defense, and this lack of distinction worked in the favor of these organizations.

In terms of public perceptions, no one entity maintained responsibility or ownership of risk. These organizations externalized responsibility for safety onto the public and in the case of a hypothetical disaster, onto sheltering individuals in particular. However, this does not

necessarily mean that these organizations had malicious intentions—in fact, far from it. The spokesperson for the incinerator revealed his frustration about this very thing, as much of his energy and time goes into severing the public’s close association between the incinerator and stockpile. This association creates a certain amount of dissonance in the communication of his central message: the incinerator is perfectly safe, and it exists to eradicate the dangerous stockpile.

On the other hand, these same organizations permeate the surrounding community with an abundance of risk information and materials. This risk information takes many forms and approaches. One could say the discourse is rather diffuse. The public relations outreach inundates the public with numerous waves of mailings, pamphlets, calendars, and maps reinscribing the geographies of risk. Earlier on, this effort included the dissemination of evacuation plans, the holding of public meetings, and the instillation of an expansive siren and radio warning system. This outreach effort also includes many radio and television spots, and the local paper ultimately reinforces this same public relations effort.

This chapter describes these efforts in the exact words of the research participants. It describes the production and distribution of information and materials coming from the organizations supporting the stockpile and chemical incinerator. It describes the uncontested diagnostic frame for incineration in Anniston: that the stockpile was dangerous to the community, and it had to be destroyed. It outlines the fantasy documents used to sell incineration, and it describes the objects manufactured to give life to these documents. Overall, this chapter illustrates how the Depot and related organizations introduced and distributed symbolic safety to the community.

THE BLACK BOX

“I feel like the Depot might as well be another planet.”

Most of the study participants had little direct experience with the Depot. This was even more so concerning the stockpile and especially with the chemical incinerator. Most of their experiences came indirectly through the secondhand experiences of family and friends, or they pieced it together in their imagination. Because so many people work at the Depot, a lot of information was secondhand. It was very common for people in the area to personally know someone working out there. Anna explained:

I think that for people *not* to know what was going on out there, I don't see how they couldn't have known because if your parents didn't work at the Depot, there was somebody in your family that did.

Asking Dorothy about the Depot, she related a common sentiment:

I'm pretty sure it's important. I don't know much about the Depot, really. I've known people that work out there and stuff, but I don't know much about it mostly.

Curtis told a similar story about the Depot:

Some of my friends' parents in high school worked at the Depot, but when I was growing up, I guess my impression, what I thought when I was growing up was that they worked at a place that made weapons, and I imagined they made tanks and stuff. Like you see on the world war two films when the women are working in the factories—that's what I imagined.

The Depot is a restricted space, and relatively few non-military people have physically been onsite. Far fewer ever see the incinerator: even pictures are limited to the public. Describing the larger complex, one participant told me:

To me, I feel like the Depot might as well be another planet. I've been on the Depot once, and I didn't like a single second of it [laughing], you know? I guess

I could find it if I went looking for it, but I couldn't really tell you where it is, you know what I mean?

He continued:

The Depot feels like, it feels like the chemical plant in the movie Batman [laughing]. You know what I mean? [loud laughing]...I was working for [Company Name Removed], and we had some drops there, and we got there, we're going and it's grassy you know, and there's a buffalo, and we turn a corner, and it's like a cement city. It was awful! [laughing] And that's it. That's all I saw. There were train tracks and pipes, and stone buildings, and it was awful.

To most people, the entire complex was essentially an unexplored mystery; it is a phenomenological abyss—a void. Harriet explained, “What I can see is that it's off the radar. Out of sight out of mind...we don't hear about it; we don't know about it; we don't talk about it.”

“Out of sight, out of mind, the incinerator is totally out of sight.”

Because of its location and the closed nature of the Depot, few people visit or even see the incinerator. In fact, one could describe the incinerator as physically hidden from public eyes.

Anna described the incinerator's hidden nature:

You don't see it. It's not in a place in town that you drive by and see this, you know, huge structure. If it were in an area of town like near Quintard or something like that...that you saw it, but even if you work at the Depot, close to it—It's in an such an area you may not even see it...It's not like there's a *huge* smokestack that you can see or anything like that.

Jared told me that the incinerator is, “Out of sight, out of mind, the incinerator is *totally* out of sight.”

Wanting more information, I asked him, “Your friends, too? Do you ever talk about it?”

“No, not really. No. We never talk about it,” he answered.

“A lot of people tell me they don't think about it. It's not on their mind.”

Jared responded, “Yeah. You never think about it.” One participant got to tour the facility as part of her job. She described:

I took a tour of the facility, but that’s it. I know a lot of it is closed-container, mechanized, they take out the explosive parts and the nasty parts in the burn thing, and that’s about it.

The incinerator was rather mysterious in terms of the exact process. Much like with details of the chemical weapons, very few people knew the particulars of incineration and what exactly went on at the Anniston incinerator. I asked Simon if he knew how incineration worked:

No. Not really. I mean, no more than what the word incineration implies. [chuckle] I know a lot of the chemical agents are... once they reach a certain temperature become inert. That’s it.

Perhaps Jared’s response to my question encapsulated the community’s span of knowledge. I asked, “Do you know a lot about incineration or what happen out there?”

Jared answered, “No. It’s a mystery to me.”

And this lack of information should make sense, given the military mission of the Depot complex. Reflecting on the transition from Cold War secrecy to contemporary disclosure, an official at the incinerator remembered:

The focus on safely storing the weapons became very, very important, but we talked about it very, very little. At one time, as a public affairs officer, I was counseled you can neither confirm nor deny whether Anniston Army Depot has chemical weapons, biological weapons, nuclear weapons, weapons of mass destruction. Then in January of 1996, the Defense Department released a news release, saying: not only do we have chemical weapons, wink, wink, but this is where that material is, and they spelled out exactly what was where.

Despite the importance of the Anniston Army Depot, many people in the community have no direct experience with the facility. Although thousands of people work on the site, the larger public does not get firsthand knowledge of the Depot, and this is in stark contrast to the open nature of the old Fort McClellan in Anniston. The Depot

persists as a complete mystery to most people, and considering the high risk potential of the stockpile and its close proximity to a relatively highly populated area, this fact remains fascinating.

*THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS: ACHIEVING SAFETY THROUGH
RISK*

Relative to the mystery of what happens at the Depot and the incinerator was an abundance of information concerning the stockpile: specifically the deteriorating condition of weapons in Anniston and the subsequent danger they imposed on the community. This potential danger was the master narrative supporting incineration, and I *never* heard anyone dispute this claim, not even incineration opponents. In other words, although incineration was a high-risk endeavor with potentially catastrophic consequences in the event of a mishap, it was framed as a safety measure to the public. Rather than allowing the weapons to degrade and risking an accidental release, public officials claimed, it is safer to destroy them.

“Shoot, am I going to start twitching and having all kinds of neurological damage and whatnot?”

Most of the people I spoke with did not have technical knowledge about the chemical weapons stored at the Anniston Depot. Most common knowledge of the stockpile was rather anecdotal, and much of it was pure speculation. However, although this knowledge was problematic in detail, the overall picture was fairly consistent and clear. People were acutely aware of the possible danger these weapons pose, and details aside, these weapons scared them. People feared these munitions, and they saw them as dangerous to the community. Greg recalled his first realization of the nearby stockpile:

So we were getting ready to invade Iraq; the discussion of chemical weapons was pretty common. Everybody was nervous about chemical weapons being used on our troops and all of a sudden come to find out that just down the street, there's a huge stockpile of chemical weapons! And that was very unnerving because what I knew, which wasn't much, was that they were very unstable...highly *uncontrollable*, and that's one of the reasons they don't use them anymore. So shoot, am I going to start twitching and having all kinds of neurological damage and whatnot? So it was, yeah, it was very unnerving. If I would have known before I bought a house, and the realtor didn't even say anything about it, I would have definitely looked somewhere else for a home.

Often knowledge of these weapons comes through rumor and hearsay. People hear things from someone "in the know". Carla explained:

Yeah, there has been, talking about chemicals and how they've been used in war, and what types there are, and how they would affect your body. We talked about that in high school. Me and a bunch of my friends did; one of the guys knew a lot about stuff like that, and it came up one day, and we started arguing about we could do this or do that to prevent it, but ultimately he was like, no you cannot [laugh]. But I remember that.

Like so many people in the area, Simon's family member works at the Depot. I asked him if his relative ever talks about these weapons:

He was in the military, so they spoke in acronyms. I never had an idea of what he was talking about anyway. Every time we moved, his job kind of changed anyway. So I never really knew what he was doing: one day he's working on armored, hermetically sealed transports, and another time, he's working with robots, and another time, he tells me hey, if this gets on your skin, you're dead! That's great. That's nice. What's very surprising, I remember one day he had a file that listed a bunch of chemical and biological agents, and what I didn't realize was that how many varieties there were. I thought as far as chemical weapons go, there's three or four; there's dozens that do all sorts of stuff. I had no idea. That's kind of scary. They keep coming up with stuff that's better I guess, relatively.

Other respondents place the stockpile in the scope and potential for devastation. In terms of an incident and subsequent potential deaths, I asked Wendy, "Do you think that's a realistic danger? That a thousand people could die?" She answered:

I think so, yeah, because they talked about how it depended how the wind was blowing, it depended on which way it would go, and how quickly it would get there, and how far it would spread. So I definitely think it's realistic that thousands of people could die. Especially if you're in your car, you're not going to have your gas mask. You had to be at home, and if it happens during the day, how many people would be at home?

Others cite the very nature of these weapons of mass destruction. I asked Simon about the prospects of surviving a major chemical release:

I have a hard time believing that [laughing]. You got to think: those weapons are designed to go around corners; that's why they were made. You know what I mean? Otherwise, you make a big enough bomb to kill everybody. You can put yourself in a bunker and you're safe from a bomb, but you're not going to be safe from chemical weapons. You're not going to be safe in your house. Look at the dustbowl. People lived in these prairie houses, and they sealed up every crack they could find in that house, and it didn't matter. The place was still filled with dust and they had mud in their lungs. It's the same thing, and chemical agents are even finer.

EXPLOSIONS

“like a time bomb, just sitting there”

I asked the spokesperson for the incinerator about the stockpile and its dangers, and he explained that, “we [the military] didn't have was [sic] a good plan if something happened in storage.” And that “something” he referred to was an explosive disaster. This danger of explosion was in part to the age and straightforward design of the firing mechanisms in these aging weapons:

The rockets that we had: they had a motor that was lit off with electricity, and there was a very real threat that stray lightening could set off a rocket. One rocket fire could affect an other; two could affect four, and four could affect eight, and it becomes a nightmare.

However, the Army mitigated this danger of explosion through the proximity and design of the “igloos” that housed these weapons. Again, the official stated:

The igloos were designed with very wide sidewalls, tapered roofs, if there was an explosion, the force of the explosion would go up, therefore even though the igloos were spaced apart, there would be even less of a tendency to have a domino effect. This one blows up; this one blows up, and so forth. The way they are designed, the force goes up and then implodes back down. It becomes a localized issue, a very dangerous issue...

He and local officials were legitimately concerned with the dangers of storage, as these igloos were not fail proof; unprovoked, he explained one troubling event from years past:

Yes, an igloo did explode at Anniston Army Depot back in about 1957, a non-chemical igloo, and the igloo performed as designed. Fortunately no one was there; it was the middle of the night, but other igloos were not affected: big hole still exists.

But that explosion did affect people outside the Depot. Irene recalled the explosion:

That one was bad enough that in my husband's family's house, it rocked the neighborhood enough that it broke their front glass out of their house. And you know, the restricted area was pretty far back. Nah, we felt it.

Many people communicated they had concerns with the danger associated with natural disasters—perhaps more so than incineration itself. In 2011, a rash of tornadoes devastated Tuscaloosa, and this disaster was fresh in the mind of the people I interviewed. The Anniston area is obviously not immune from tornadoes and severe thunderstorms. One participant explained how nature was more threatening to the community than incineration:

Now, what if the tornadoes had hit the Depot, and that's a different issue, and that was actually brought up, and they were talking about the strength of the igloos and what they could stand, but a natural disaster like that, it could be an issue.

Others saw it as a strong motivator to do something. Wendall testified to the dangers of indefinite storage:

You can leave them there while they deteriorate, and it's just a matter of time until there would be an accident, or there would be a natural disaster like a tornado or wreck or something where somehow there was a release or something. So something had to be done.

Talking about it in hindsight, the Army spokesperson capitalized on the fears of a natural disaster in the Anniston area:

The storms that came through in April, very, very nasty storms, if we had the original stockpile, there's no way for me to say we would have had an incident because of the storms, however, the entire community was able to focus on the storm and the aftermath of the storm; we did not have to worry about nerve agent weapons still stored at Anniston Army Depot, and I think that is the *best* thing about the project, that was gone, and that storm and the hurricanes earlier, we didn't have to deal with nerve agent weapons as well.

LEAKS

“We have a theory that is: we call it nerve gas water...there's something in the water. Have you seen them? We have these black grasshoppers...that ate the wrong thing and mutated into something pretty nasty...and they eat everything.”

According to many of the people I interviewed, the aging stockpile contained dangers other than explosions. There were concerns that the chemical weapons leaked dangerous contaminants into the local environment and especially the water table. Speaking with Anna, she confirmed some of these concerns:

I do believe it was decomposing and posing a risk to workers and the community because my [family member] worked in that area, and they were constantly having to get the leaking whatever they were stored in.

In his typical fashion, Hank joked about the leaks and their possible effects on the local insects—something I also entertained growing up in the area:

We have a theory that is: we call it nerve gas water...there's something in the water. Have you seen them? We have these black grasshoppers...that ate the wrong thing and mutated into something pretty nasty...and they eat everything.

This issue is particularly important in light of the outstanding pollution in Anniston from Monsanto. Vera explained these fears:

[The Army] had canister upon canister of the different agents out there, and some of them were starting to leach. They were degrading, and of course with the PCB's and things that came about with Monsanto, you don't want that in the groundwater and into people's lives that way. So they needed to dispose of it.

I inquired of Jared why he thinks the Army put these chemical weapons here in the first place.

Citing PCB pollution, he answered, "Probably for multiple reasons: people don't tend to think of this region nationally unless it's the butt of a joke. It was already probably considered a toxic dumping ground."

These comments really speak to the power of the Army's diagnostic frame. Many participants felt that doing nothing was a greater risk than incineration. Sarah described this urgency to do something:

They had people that worked at the Depot saying they *had* to do something about the stuff out there; they had to...so it was better to do the incinerator than just let everything sit there and get out into the water and everything else.

Even fewer respondents knew of the other contaminants coming from activities out on the Depot and the former Fort McClellan. These are not necessarily directly connected to the stockpile, but they are important nevertheless. Interviewing Martha, she told me about this other, lesser-known contamination:

Out on McClellan, it was unexploded ordinance, there was some ground contamination I think, but the UXO is the always the biggest thing, and of course out at the Depot, it's this water-table contamination, and it's the same water table Anniston water works pulls its water from, there's a lot of concern, but the army has paid for filters that the water works has put in: the contamination is very volatile, so all you have to do is expose it to air, and it evaporates out of the water, so that's what these strippers the water works has put in are all about.

MAKING THE CASE: ORGANIZATIONAL ATTEMPTS TO INFORM THE PUBLIC

After disclosing the stockpile exists in Anniston, the Department of Defense and Calhoun County officials made a concerted effort to inform the community about the dangers of the stored weapons. This effort emerged from the larger, federal Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program (CSEPP), and this national program came in response to federal legislation (Public Law 99-145) requiring increased public protection from chemical weapons disposal nationally (Chemical Materials Agency 2011). The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funded these efforts, and with the coordination of the US Army and state and local governments, risk information disseminated into the greater Anniston area.

CSEPP, the Alabama Emergency Management Agency, and the local county Emergency Management Agencies circulated the risk information through several avenues. They distributed a lot of risk information through the mail. They produced and distributed thousands of informational calendars and pamphlets for the population of Anniston and the affected, surrounding populations. Included in this effort was a reorganization of local geographies: they essentially reinscribed the surrounding populations into new zones of risk—complete with colorful maps to illustrate the concept. Each zone received different risk information and especially, risk materials according to their proximity to the Anniston stockpile. This effort complimented a rather insistent media campaign on the radio and television. If everyone did not know their zones, they knew they should know. Early in this campaign, this risk information included evacuation plans, and although officials eventually discarded the evacuation tactic for sheltering in place, the concept remained in their risk literature, and most of the people I spoke with regarded evacuation—at least for themselves as individuals—as the way to go.

MAILINGS

“know your zones, blah, blah, blah”

All the research participants were familiar with the mailings from the Emergency Management Agencies and CSEPP. As mentioned before, these organizations inundated the surrounding area with risk information. Craig explained:

Yeah, let's see. We definitely got at least three different mailings over the course of two or three years that describes zones of where you live, and so you can see geographically which one you were in, and they explained some plans: if you hear this particular siren or these announcements, if you are in this zone, we'll explain what for you should do. It may be you shelter in place, it may be you get out in your car, certain areas should evacuate.

These efforts were very successful in getting the information to the public. Many of the participants easily recalled the general message. Lighting up a fresh cigarette, Bob told me:

Every year they mail out maps to individual households showing you know, based on climate patterns and the weather which way, if something happened, there was a large leak, which way the things would go, who would be the most affected, and along with the weather alert system they put here, they are tapped into that with the facility if anything happens with the facility that weather alert system will go off, and let you know there has been a chemical accident at the Depot and gives instructions on what to do.

These mailings became a little redundant over the years, although most of the people I interviewed did not mind the reminder. These occasional reminders served as the only notice for many people living farther away from the incinerator. Originally unfamiliar with the danger, Curtis told me:

Okay, well, I didn't realize really what the danger was, and then there was the whole education program where the Calhoun County disaster management whatever was like here's how we shelter in place, know your zones, blah, blah, blah, and they always sent you stuff in the mail. I remember I would get things in my apartment, and it would tell you: this is the situation, and here, if you need a kit, you can write to this address or whatever.

Many of the mailings included an attractive calendar providing important risk information; these calendars included: emergency contact information, zoning demarcations and their relationship to appropriate evacuation and sheltering behaviors, evacuation routes, and of course, pictures of classic cars parked at local, scenic locations.

For many people in the area these mailings served as their main point of contact and source of risk information. I asked Martha if she picked up a sheltering kit; she answered, “No. I was out of the zone for the kit. What did I get? I got the tone alert thing, and of course they give you the calendars”. Again, I asked Simon if he received any risk materials in the mail. He replied:

I’ve never received any. I *feel* like Jacksonville is just outside that bubble of safety, you know what I mean? People closer received packages, you know, warning, evacuation plans and stuff like that, and here I don’t feel like, I mean, the places I’ve lived around here, I’ve never received anything of that nature. I did get a calendar that told me what the whooping noises of the sirens meant, but that’s about it.

People closer to the stockpile tend to be a little more aware of the zones and their significance. Talking to people in my “home town”, Sarah explained, “we’ve got all the maps that show where we are, as far as Weaver is in a terrible zone with the way the wind blows.” Others had to know about the zoning because of their line of work and its close relationship with emergency management:

I was involved in initial meetings for counties surrounding and including Calhoun County with several different people on evacuation planning. It was a big deal because Calhoun county and surrounding counties were chopped up into zones, and further down from the larger zones were smaller neighborhood zones...have been and still are on the periphery involved in a project to identify those who are homebound, without transportation, and latchkey kids, so that in the event of a disaster, initially a disaster at the incinerator, those people could be identified by neighborhood to say there are two people that need transportation and have no other means, with one in a wheelchair and one is bed bound, so on and so forth. That’s still going on; the data is still being collected. The best I know, it’s going into a database, and nothing’s being done with it because

evacuation region-wide was abandoned for what they call shelter in place. They would not have massive evacuations.

A coordinated evacuation was eventually abandoned for sheltering in place. But the initial concept really took root with the people I interviewed. Over time this keenness towards evacuation became associated, and perhaps even blurred, with the tactics used to deal with massive hurricanes farther south. Asked about her plans if an accident happens at the Anniston Depot, Vera gave me the evacuation details:

With the way traffic is and all, they pretty much planned out the quickest route to get to I-20 or either going over 10th street Mountain or down Quintard to hit the interstate, and for a while, we had the little signs—I don't even notice any more. We used to have the signs like they do for the hurricanes you know, but like I said, I haven't paid any attention whether we still have those or not.

MEETINGS

“I never attended those meetings; I'm not that type of person to attend those types of meetings.”

Local officials held several public meetings to satisfy federal guidelines concerning community input and involvement. These meetings provided the public relations team at the incinerator a chance to make their case. Bob explained:

Well, they held multiple, multiple meetings. They presented all the studies...So they had a lot of information to provide to the community to show them that it was potentially safe, to do...

But interestingly, these meetings also provided incineration opponents an opportunity to demonstrate their version of events, and more importantly, the chance to ask difficult questions about incineration. The opponents to incineration made a lot of headway at the start of these meetings. Anna described:

I remember attendance at those community meetings, and they were like—sometimes you think about community meetings and maybe lack of attendance to apathy, I think about the voter polls and they talk about voter apathy, but some of those things, people can choose not to attend, but there was pretty large attendance at these meetings.

But this inertia would eventually wane. Many people became tired of the movement opposing the incinerator, and community involvement and interest in incineration became less and less popular. All the controversy concerning incineration was short-lived. Wendall observed:

They would call public hearings, and not hardly anyone would go. I mean, other than that handful of people that did not like the method. And it really might be a dozen, and that's about it. So not hardly anybody would ever show up at those meetings.

The meetings would eventually devolve into technocratic updates: numbers and figures. Soon very few people would care about the incinerator, and even fewer would speak out against it.

Important questions were raised at these meetings, but eventually these gatherings work in favor of the incinerator and proponents of that disposal technology. Sarah remembered:

Westinghouse would have big, nice luncheons like the P.R., you know, at first especially. People didn't want it, and they promised all this, and of course we got the emergency preparedness things, they've got all kinds of money now because of the incinerator around here; they've got so much, and they'd... What was your question now?

I reminded her, "I was asking about the meetings." She continued:

And they would be telling the progress: some of the things had been burned because they had a vast amount—a terrible big amount of all kinds of chemicals. And they told the reason they had to do this was because of this treaty with Russia—they had to get rid of theirs, and we had to get rid of ours—and there was *so* much here, and of course a lot of the chemicals were leaking out into the ground, and it was dangerous, and that's true. And there were so many questions. We are sitting on a fault line, and I have questions about that. I mean, we're on a huge fault line; they say it's as big as California's. Well, what's going to happen to the incinerator if something happens; it's sitting right on a fault line. Of course that would be the same thing will all this stuff out at the Fort, but they would give time for questions, and tell would tell you how many rockets had been burned, how many are left, and what stage, and I believe it's in the final

stages now; so I don't think, I don't worry about the incinerator as long as Westinghouse is there, but when they leave, that's when I'll be worried.

MEDIA

“Yeah, it's a good paper for it to be local, our only paper...”

Although Anniston as a whole had fallen into disrepair and into an economic malaise, it somehow maintained a fairly sizable, independent newspaper: *The Anniston Star*. Asked about the incinerator, Bob told me, “*The Anniston Star*, the local newspaper, covered every inch of it as it happened”, and this close, detailed coverage plays an important role guiding in public opinion on chemical incineration.

Most of the *Star's* coverage was not critical. Looking back, the *Anniston Star* primarily conveyed technocratic information coming from the public relations people working at the CSEPP. This dry, statistical reporting gave many people the impression that CSEPP wanted: everything was fine, and the incinerator was effective and safe. As Greg told me, “they're taking care of business, and what little I've heard in the newspapers has been positive: just giving updates on how far they are going and stuff like that.” Harold echoed this positive sentiment:

You read about it; you hear about it. There are milestones that are announced, especially with munitions, percentage of munitions, or a grade of weaponry: whether it be the mustard gas or GB gas—the nerve agents are gone, or things like that.

When asked about her awareness of the incinerator, Tonya also told me about reading the *Star*:

Yeah. Out of sight and out of mind: every now and then there will be something about it in the newspaper, and I'll read it, and it's nothing derogatory or anything like that [aimed at the incinerator]. Like the last thing in the paper was the fact that everything was going along fine, and they will probably be through with everything by 2011, in the fall of 2011, I think.

Discussions on the incinerator and the *Anniston Star* inevitably bring up the issue of opposition to chemical incineration. The paper was not immune from taking an editorial stand on

the issue. Initially the owner and editor switched positions on incineration, but as Will explained, this became politically untenable:

[Name Removed] was out to vilify H. Brant Ayers, the owner and editor of the local newspaper which everyone affectionately calls the ‘red star’—the *Anniston Star*. [Name Removed] started taking potshots at Brant Ayers and Bill Clinton, and initially Brant Ayers was pro incinerator, but Brant keeps an open mind, and he eventually decided, no, he was against incineration, and even though the anti-incinerator crowd was—it would had to been a minority, it was still a very vocal minority. It was...oddly enough, well it tended to be a fairly well educated minority; it tended to be a lot of the students from the college, a lot of professors from the college, more of the professional people from Anniston and the surrounding area, and I think Brant realized, maybe he realized, well, my readers all don’t like my position, maybe I should change my position.

As this passage alludes, the oppositional movement—really one outspoken leader in the movement—did not make a strong effort to work with the local media. This broken relationship led to the stigmatizing of local activists. Wendall explained:

The *Anniston Star*, the local newspaper everybody reads, for some reason, made the decision to be pro-incinerator, and so they really promoted that side in a positive light, and the people against the incineration process, they pretty much labeled them as *radicals*, and [Name Removed] in the English Department at JSU, was sort of labeled as a radical for his anti-incinerator stance and asking questions and getting involved with the movement which I appreciate him doing all of that because he asked a lot of questions that needed to be asked and probably were not adequately addressed, and as a result of all what they did, there are a lot more things that had to happen: like schools had to have safe zones, and they had to change air conditioning system out, and a lot of things in schools that were close by and hospitals, so I think they did a lot of good. The emergency system was improved considerably in case of an accident that would not have taken place if these people had not asked questions. Pretty much, the community was oblivious [laugh], even with all the stuff in the paper.

Another participant confirmed Wendall’s description. I asked her about reading the paper, and Anna answered, “There was a lot of stuff in the paper, and I was not an avid *Anniston Star* reader as a high school student you know, but there was a lot in the paper.”

I follow-up, asking, “Did the paper take a stand one way or another about the incinerator?”

Anna replied, “I can’t remember, but I think the information that’s been printed in the paper in the recent years since the disposal’s been active has been positive.” When asked about media coverage of local events, Dorothy told me:

I don’t even get the Anniston newspaper. I watch the 6 o’clock news. If you don’t live in Birmingham, or somewhere around Birmingham, you don’t see much news. You don’t see Anniston, Jacksonville, we don’t have much local news at all...but like I said, if it don’t happen in Birmingham or whatever, then you don’t hear about it. I was surprised they did mention the accident out on Fort McClellan yesterday. They did say Calhoun County, Fort McClellan, which is shocking, because they usually don’t mention it in the news.

I asked her, “So do you think that’s a problem?”

Looking at the carpet below her, Dorothy answered, “Yes, I wish we had more news coverage.”

After talking with all the participants, I found myself noticing there was not a lot of good information on local matters. The *Anniston Star* did a good job, but its coverage was mostly limited to the largely uncontroversial, technical details of incineration. The *Star* was not friendly to the opponents of incineration, and they never got the same coverage CSEPP enjoyed; this omission really worked to mute any alternative narratives, and it helped cement incineration as the only legitimate option for disposal.

TELEVISION

“Everybody was so happy”

In order to facilitate their outreach efforts, CSEPP produced and released informational commercials for the communities surrounding the stockpile and incinerator. This effort was quite successful in communicating their messages to the participants in this study. Although the exact details were fuzzy, Wendy remembered the basic message. She told me about these commercials:

Definitely. Know your zone, and it would talk about the zone colors, and it would talk about the building downtown, and if you had questions, you could contact, but that's something I haven't seen in years. I don't know if those people exist anymore, he business or whatever: or the group.

Asked about the efforts of Emergency Management, Craig remembered:

They ran TV spots too, but back then I had basic cable, so I saw their TV spots they ran, and it was like, you may remember, a family: yes, we know how to shelter in place, and everybody was so happy.

OBJECTIFYING SYMBOLIC SAFETY: FANTASY OBJECTS IN ANNISTON

Everyone in the area received risk information about the stockpile, but people living closer to the stockpile were given various objects for their safety and sense of wellbeing. These safety objects—if properly used—should aid in the sheltering process. This movement to “shelter in place” came about once local officials and the various Emergency Management Agencies realized evacuation was not an ideal plan. People living farther away could pick up materials at certain collection points; people close to the stockpile were given all the sheltering materials. Specifically, the people I spoke with that lived closer to the stockpile received large boxes. These boxes contained the shelter in place kits including air filters, gas masks, instructions, and the plastic sheeting and duct tape to seal their room for sheltering in place.

BOXES

“there were other things, but I can't remember to save my life”

I asked Wendy if she received one of the shelter in place boxes, and she replies, “Oh yeah. Well, everybody gets one of those boxes—the alert boxes that is a part of the weather alert system.”

“And what was in that box?” I asked.

“There was the alert thing, you know, it also told you the weather.”

“Like a radio?” I inquired.

Wendy answered:

Like a radio: it would go off with certain tones—that was the incinerating, one of them, and they also had it for weather because sometimes, even though we have the big things outside, some can’t hear them. I want to say there was a gas mask, and I want to say some people had suit-things. But ours had a gas mask, and there were other things, but I can’t remember to save my life.

Other respondents shared their fading memories of the box. Carla recalled:

I can remember, maybe I was a freshman in high school, when everybody had to get those kits, and me and my mom went and watched that video, and you had to try the little mask thing on, and so we had to keep a kit at our house, but now it doesn’t cross your mind until the siren goes off [smiling but not quite laughing]. But you know, we know our zoning areas and everything like that, but...

Many participants disregarded the box, even when they were first distributed to the community. I imagined there were hundreds of these boxes rotting in basements all around the Anniston area. I asked Robbie about his box; his answer was particularly interesting:

Is that the radio thing? [walks away to get the radio] But I remember living in Golden Springs, we got a huge box: 3 ½ or 4 feet tall, like a big moving box. I have no idea what’s in it [short laugh].

I quickly asked him, “You didn’t open it or...”

“No. It was like emergency stuff, I don’t know! [laughing]”

Smiling, I asked, “So what did you do with it?”

Robbie replied, “Put it in a corner somewhere. What do you do with a big box like that? You don’t want to throw it away just in case there is...”

I interrupted, “So what happened to it?”

“It’s probably still there,” he answered.

“Do you know what’s in the box? I asked.

“You know, I don’t know...just stuff to tape up your windows—probably like polyethylene.”

People living farther away from the stockpile were not directly given the kits. They could pick them up at the distribution points, and some people did just that. Asked about the sheltering kits, Vera remembered:

No, I remember hearing about the kits, but I seem to remember hearing more like we have kits, and you have to come here to get them. We’re not going to give everybody one, or mail it; you have to come get it.

Some people never bothered to get a kit. Asked if she received any risk materials, Anna told me:

And then there were the shelter in place kits that we could go out to some building at Fort McClellan and pick up, which I did not pick up because you know, if there was a need to shelter in place, I was probably not going to be home because people spend more hours at work, and there were no plans for businesses because at the time I was working in Anniston, and our nurse that was our administrator in charge, she specifically looked at that: were there plans in place, were there recommendations or guidelines for businesses should an incident occur, and there wasn’t, so anyway, I never picked up my shelter in place kit.

PLASTIC AND TAPE

“what to do...In the unlikely event [smiling]”

As previously mentioned, proximity to the Anniston Army Depot determined the distribution and composition of sheltering materials. Because of all the mitigating factors, not everyone received the same risk materials. Talking to some, I found there was some question to what exactly comprised the shelter in place kits, but the plastic and tape were a staple in the entire area. Asking about the kits, Anna told me, “[laugh] I know there was like plastic sheeting and

duct tape [laughing]. I don't know what else! I don't know what else was in there, but I knew that though." Asked about these sheltering materials, Harold told me about these zones:

I did get a...I don't even know what they call it now, a kit. I was in...there are three levels around the incinerator identified in terms of hazardous zones. I was in the middle, which meant I got a box with plastic and bottled water and a towel in there...instructions and duct tape.

I ask him about people closer to the Depot. He continued:

They got everything, if you lived in the red zone—the hot zone. You got a mask for your self or family members including children, you got an air filter with activated charcoal and you got the plastic stuff. You got everything, the radio and everything.

Public facilities bordering this zone were also retrofitted for sheltering a chemical release. Asked about this, Wendy recalled her teenage fears:

I think because I was scared when everything first started coming out, [incineration] and school scared me because they had to come in and seal the windows and doors—it was like a suction thing, so when they sealed it, it [chemicals] couldn't get in. We had to do drills and stuff like that, so I think it was...I was constantly paranoid.

Greg explained a typical scenario for those living in the immediate zone. His choice of words was quite intentional:

They sent us stuff in the mail. I remember getting stuff, and I had to go to some place in McClellan, and they gave a little talk, and then I had to get an air filter and plastic and also duct tape, and they also gave us a video tape to show...or repeat what to do...In the unlikely event [smiling].

This “in the unlikely event” was a mantra repeated over and over in the CSEPP and EMA media campaign. Hearing it so many times, it became somewhat of a joke with acquaintances and friends over the years.

But people living further away received less material. Linda matter-of-factly told me, “We went and picked up our little kit with the duct tape and the plastic to put over the windows

and seal the doors.” Living in Jacksonville, Will told me, “we got a booklet: what to do in case there’s an accident. We never got our big rolls of plastic to staple over the door or anything like that.”

MASKS

I don't know, it's not going to keep my skin from blistering and falling off the bone, but it will at least save my face. This is my moneymaker!

As mentioned earlier, people living close to the stockpile were given more sheltering materials. These materials included gasmasks and hoods to protect them from a chemical release or explosion on the Depot.

Most of the participants in this study live outside these high-risk areas, but they were distantly aware of the masks and that they are distributed to some people close to the Depot. Bob told me:

I know at one point they discussed passing out gasmasks, but I don't know if that ever happened...you know what? I think they did. I think they passed out kind of a bag with a respirator—it was a plastic bag with a respirator thing on it.

Dorothy also lived farther away from the danger. She explained:

Yeah, I think that one of things they handed out was some type of masks, I don't know if they were gasmasks or something, because the nerve gasses that might leak out or something, and people that were nearby were provided those, if I recall. Now I didn't, because I'm farther away.

But her family remains close to the incinerator and stockpile. Dorothy goes on to tell me, “My sister actually got a gasmask I believe...”

I asked, “Was she worried about it?”

Dorothy answered:

I don't think she is now, but at first she was; she had some fears. Now I have a friend who's husband works at the Depot, and they live right outside the back gate to the Depot, and she and I have talked about it and joked, and she got gasmasks.

Many participants responded with humor to the overwhelming situation. I asked Will if he received a gasmask. He told me:

I personally went and purchased an old, cold war era soviet-issued gas mask. I figured maybe...I don't know, it's not going to keep my skin from blistering and falling off the bone, but it will at least save my face. This is my moneymaker!
[laughing]

He continued:

Well, I've got my gasmask incase anything happens. It's under my bed right now. I don't have it with me. If anything were to happen right now, if the wind were blowing just right. It would do me no good. It was sort of an impulse, I guess, a panic purchase, and I didn't want to give any *American* companies any money off of this. You're not going to benefit from my panic. I'll give it to the Russians, or more properly, the Ukrainians.

RADIOS

"It's never gone off before, and I don't want it to [nervous laughter]."

People living in the area surrounding the Depot were given warning radios to supplement the public siren system. Asked about these radios, Bob described his warning radio:

It's a small, gray box that's wedge shaped. It has an antenna on it. There's a series of tones that are described in the pamphlets they gave out with the box and continually passed out, I'm assuming when people move into the area to make sure that everybody continues to have the information, but the first Tuesday of every month, they test it, and the boxes go off. Any time the alert system for Calhoun county go off, the boxes go off.

The radios were linked in with the Emergency Management System. This also served to warn citizens about the weather. I asked Sarah about this, and she said, "They use it for weather too."

Asking her more about this, she explained that not everyone likes the radio system. It seems a little redundant with the extensive siren system:

You see, everybody took the phones [radios]. They really didn't have people that said no, they weren't going to take the phones. I didn't want a phone sitting around. We've got that big tower thing that *sounds* out everything, so why would you need a telephone in your house?

Others associated the radios with great anxiety. This is completely understandable. Carla communicated her worries, "It goes off when weather sirens go off, but if there's a chemical spill, like red-alert: it goes off right then. It's never gone off before, and I don't want it to [nervous laughter]."

This close association with weather makes perfect sense from an emergency management standpoint, but it effectively discouraged some people from using the radios. Will explained, "We got a radio, an emergency alert radio: we leave it unplugged. Sometimes it goes off in the middle of the night for no good reason." Others have since discarded theirs; this is due to the incineration process wrapping up. I ask Greg if he uses his radio. He answered, "No. I had a radio that they brought me to be aware, but then I got something in the mail not very long ago saying that I no longer need it."

CHAPTER SUMMARY

As shown in this chapter, organizations involved in the incineration effort have devoted considerable effort toward the production and communication of symbolic safety. To this effect, these organizations produced and distributed information and objects to the surrounding community. This illusion of safety communicated that everything is under control at the Depot, that a plan clearly existed, and that the community was properly protected against an "unlikely" incident in Anniston. Throughout this process was the implicit assumption that the experts knew

best, that sane people should be calm, and most importantly, that the existing social order remained legitimate and intact.

Although the Depot was somewhat of a black box to people in Anniston, it nevertheless presented a potentially high risk to the community, and much effort has been devoted to minimizing or at least neutralizing public perception of that risk. The lack of direct, experiential knowledge of the Depot insulated the complex from public observation and critique; without the chance to observe the happenings out there firsthand, there was the perception that civilian critics cannot definitively speak with any sense of certainty or authenticity on military matters.

Further, this obfuscation pushed the discourse on the incinerator and emergency planning away from reality and into fantasy. This can be explained by the postmodern theory of sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1981). According to Baudrillard, contemporary societies exist away from direct referential thinking. We live through simulation and simulacra, not lived experience. The citizens of Calhoun County do not directly experience the Depot. They construct their perceptions through imagination and through what they are continuously given: the reassuring fantasy of symbolic safety.

Official organizations communicate symbolic safety through the production and distribution of fantasy documents (Clarke 1999). The fantasy documents contain contingency plans for an emergency, and they have a few shortcomings. These plans tend to assume the best of conditions, they are persuasive, they have no reality check, and they offer the illusion of preparedness and control (Clarke and Perrow 1996). In the case of the Anniston stockpile and incinerator, these documents came in several forms and were distributed through several avenues of media. Locals received these documents in public meetings, through the postal service, in newspaper articles, and through pervasive advertisement campaigns in radio, print, and television. These documents first instructed citizens to evacuate the area, but this tactic would eventually

become abandoned—although not completely—for the preferred strategy of sheltering in place. The documents also simultaneously informed the public of the dangers from the stockpile and the safety of incineration, and they reorganized the geographies of the area into its spatial relationship to the stockpile and incinerator. These organizations worked effectively to produce and distribute symbolic safety.

In addition to the production and distribution of fantasy documents, these organizations engaged in producing and distributing numerous fantasy objects. Fantasy objects are tangible, physical things that sell fantasy documents. In Anniston, these exist as shelter in place kits, gas masks, air filters, and the ubiquitous emergency radios. When successful these objects work to embody and reify fantasy documents. Dramaturgically speaking, they make the illusion seem real; these items give life to the fantasy. They make the documents factual. Their concrete tangibility lulls audiences into the illusion of symbolic safety. It silences critics and discourages critical thinking. The following chapters explore the impacts these efforts have had on the public's perception of risk.

CHAPTER VI

BUYING SYMBOLIC SAFETY: PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE OF OFFICIAL DEFINITIONS OF RISK AND SAFETY IN ANNISTON

This chapter addresses the question of how the public consumed and ultimately perceived the efforts of incineration proponents to produce and successfully sell symbolic safety.

Supporters of the incineration had several things in common. They reported that the various organizations associated with the incinerator and stockpile performed very well, and that the risk information and materials provided a sense of comfort and security against the acknowledged threats of the degrading stockpile. To a lot of these people, the narrative for incineration offered several advantages over any alternative technologies to incineration like chemical neutralization—a possibility that staunch supporters of incineration universally contested. Many people felt that the risks of incineration were far less than the risks of continued storage in Anniston. Some respondents preferred incinerating the materials onsite, opposed to transporting the potentially unstable munitions to other locations.

Additional factors contributed to the persuasiveness of symbolic safety. A number of the supporters knew someone working at the Anniston Army Depot; knowing an employee worked to make the incineration proponents seem trustworthy. It provided the incinerator a human face and worked to further legitimate their efforts. These supporters positively referenced other chemical weapon incinerators across the nation, and they valued the advertised safety redundancies inherent in the process. Other supporters reported influencing details that played into their

perception that incineration was safe. These included mitigating factors like time, weather, and distance. Others found comfort in surrendering to a sense of fatalism, and some remained ignorant of the issue, while others maintained a sense of denial about it.

Lastly, the distributed risk information and sheltering materials comforted several participants in this study. They defined these materials as adequate, and the distribution of these materials—especially the risk information—provided the impression that government officials successfully prepared the community; positive media coverage solidified this effect.

Overall, this research suggested that incineration proponents were successful in their efforts to convince the community of the incinerator’s safety. If not convinced outright, people were at least aware of the proposed reasons for incineration, and as time passed, incineration existed as a largely unopposed reality in Anniston.

FINDING COMFORT IN DISCOMFORT

“They’ve done an excellent, excellent job.”

Although they were aware and fearful of the risks associated with incineration, many research participants were ultimately comforted with the efforts of the emergency management agencies and the information provided by the Chemical Stockpile Emergency Preparedness Program (CSEPP). The multiplicity of factors seems to be important. Put simply, these efforts were not necessarily sufficient by themselves, but together, they worked rather synergistically to comfort individuals. Asked if he thought the incineration and emergency preparedness people were doing a good job, Bob explained:

Yeah. I would say that I feel comfortable with what they are doing with the facility and what they are trying to achieve. You know, they put safety implements into place for the communities. Every year they mail out maps to individual households showing you know, based on climate patterns and the

weather which way, if something happened, there was a large leak, which way the things would go, who would be the most affected, and along with the weather alert system they put here, they are tapped into that with the facility if anything happens with the facility that weather alert system will go off, and let you know there has been a chemical accident at the Depot and gives instructions on what to do.

And other people openly welcomed the incinerator. I asked Carla if her family supported incineration. She told me, “I know my mom did, but they [the family] were definitely for it: get rid of it, get them [the chemical weapons] out of here, we don’t need them”—not an uncommon sentiment with the number of incineration supporters I interviewed.

Although rarely mentioned by those supporting incineration, the brief opposition to the incinerator may actually motivate the more outspoken supporters of incineration. Interestingly, Martha included these opponents with the other—perhaps more mundane—obstacles to overcome:

Yeah, well, you know what all went on with CAP and all the groups that resisted the incinerator from going up. They finally got beyond that and started burning. They’ve done an *excellent, excellent* job. They burned the most insidious stuff first within the first year—much shorter than that I think—they had most of the worst stuff gone. They’ve had very, very minor incidents happen that were always well under control. The biggest *faux pas* they had was in the construction of the building. If you were around for that, they made some bad concrete pours, and had to deconstruct and reconstruct things a few times. At any rate, they will be finished with their mission sooner than expected, which is next...2011 September.

The opposition to incineration began with some fervor, but this would quickly become short-lived. Thinking back to when she first picked up her sheltering materials, Wendy recalled:

I remember, I forgot what they were called, but they had their building downtown, and they would get out, they would get the boxes out, and they got the messages out about the incinerator, but I remember there was a lot of you know, mad people and protesting, and they didn’t want it there, and their kids, and the place was like this is what would happen, so it was two different sides telling you two different things, so it was very confusing. But I know the community was very up in arms about it.

I asked, “I’ve heard people describe it this way, at first it was a big issue, and it kind of went away.”

Wendy agreed, “Yeah, evidently it went from one extreme to nothing.”

Interviewing another respondent, he brought up the opposition movement to the incinerator. I asked Hank if he was personally familiar with anyone opposing the incinerator. He paused for a second and thoughtfully answered:

Sigh. That’s a good question. I wasn’t all that in tuned to it. What happened is that the concept sounded pretty horrible. They’re going to burn this stuff, well what happens if it screws up? You know once the alternatives were discussed: trying to relocate, et cetera, I think a lot of people either got tired of the issue or came to the realization that the best thing to do was get rid of it somehow, and how are you going to get rid of it? And that [incineration] seemed to be the best solution. Now there are people that never agreed with that, and probably still don’t agree with it, but...

Another supporter mentioned the opposition movement in his own statements about the incinerator. I asked Curtis if government officials did a good job communicating risk information. Smiling broadly, he answered:

The Depot wanted to get rid of these things, so if I were them, I would want to make it seem safe as it could possibly be whether it were or not, just from that perspective, they did a good job because I never felt like I was afraid except when I heard from [Name Removed]: you should be totally afraid of this thing! I think the Depot did a good job at like, that’s a crazy guy! You don’t need to worry. We’re totally safe! So, I think they did a good job in that respect. I don’t...whether they lucked up or was it really safe, I don’t know, but they did manage to get at this point the majority of it taken care of with no incidents, or none that anybody has become aware of, so.

And there was a wide continuum between opposition and support. Illustrating this very point, Harold described his path from opposition to reluctant acceptance. I asked if he supported the incinerator and efforts at the Depot; looking across the oval table, he shrugged and explained:

I didn't at first. I thought it was going to be such a routine for them that it would be an army-led project that mistake or not, who cares? It's just a small, rural town in northeastern Alabama. Okay, we will just relocate the population. We've ruined the land, the air, and the water. We will relocate them 30 miles north. All is well and forgotten. That was my initial as this thing was ramping up. That would be the attitude. You know? It would be a Union Carbide thing. Oops, we killed five thousand people; we'll get some bad press. We'll pay out some money; we'll move on, but as history has defined us and been written, they've actually done a good job.

DISCOUNTING ALTERNATIVES

“The closer it can be to the chemical agents, the better. If they had to transport that stuff across the country to incinerate it? The likelihood of something happening is a hundredfold, you know?”

Partially because the opposition movement never took off, many people did not seriously consider any alternatives to incineration—including relocation of the stockpile. A salient factor cited by those supporting incineration was the inherent danger and difficulty of transporting the Anniston stockpile to another location for disposal. Explaining her support of the incinerator, Irene revealed her concerns:

I had no problem when they built the incinerator because like I said, I thought it was better to get rid of them on sight rather than to move them because I knew how unstable they were. And from my point of view, they were there—they was [sic] dangerous there as they probably were going to be to incinerate, so I have no problem with that. I keep up with it enough to know they were meeting their goals, and they had done the majority of what they planned to.

Also concerned about transporting the materials, Linda echoed Irene's sentiment:

I keep up with it a little bit. I've got some friends that work out there, but you know, it came on like in 2002 or 3 or something like that, but once they got most of the big stuff burned off, you know, you kind of still keep an ear open to hear anything going on out there, but for the most part, it's been a pretty safe operation. I would just assume them burn them out—build an incinerator than them to have to try to ship whatever we had out there off somewhere.

Part of the concern about transporting these materials was the notable danger of accidents. There were a lot of unknowns when it comes to moving these highly volatile materials through busy intersections and highly populated communities. Vera explained:

I trust what they are doing. I know what they've done is the way things should have been done. I would much rather there be the incinerator and they take care of the issues they've been taking care of than putting all that on trucks or trains and come through town, driving on roads and having an accident or whatever...

INCINERATION MAKES US SAFER

“So I think if something would have happened at the Depot before the incinerator, the outcome would have been much worse.”

Many participants welcomed the incinerator into the community. Quite contrary to the minority opposing incineration, these avid supporters told me that the incinerator and CSEPP were actually making the community much safer.

Participants like Vera wholly trusted the people working out at the Depot. I asked if she thought they would decommission the incinerator after eradication of the stockpile, she remarked:

I think they will shut it down. I think the same reason it was built here, to take care of the munitions or gases or whatever they were dealing with, to protect the community as far as it not being transported out of here to somewhere else, I feel the same thing will happen. They will close here and move on to the next place and take care of it. I feel they are as concerned as a spill or a leak or whatever as the people that live here with it are, and I don't think they want to see...I don't think they want that to happen, an accident to happen, or someone to be injured because of something spilling or releasing.

Linking the incinerator with the federal funds and the subsequent efforts to achieve emergency preparedness, Anna shared her supporting thoughts on the incinerator coming to town:

I think the fact that the incinerator came here helped our overall emergency preparedness for the entire community and the Depot too. Because we were able to get funding, money, and resources we couldn't have otherwise. So I think if

something would have happened at the Depot before the incinerator, the outcome would have been much worse. I think it's forced us to be better prepared, but there would still be some issues, but anyway, that's what I think.

Most outspoken proponents of incineration felt the incinerator made the community safer, logic that parallels the overarching narrative coming from government officials. Vera discounted the worry of opponents. To her:

I feel like the way they [people pushing incineration over alternatives] handled it is much better. It's been a lot safer. And of course people panic over different things, but heck, tornadoes come in town and people are going to panic: it could happen, it could not happen, you have people that are going to worry over everything. But I think they've done an excellent job with the way they have handled the chemicals there.

Others also discounted the concerns and worries of the general population. Asking Curtis if he thought the community was prepared for an incident or accident at the Depot, he downplayed the possibilities of risk:

I don't have any idea. See, since I think the risk is very low, I would say yes. They were probably were prepared because I don't think there's a lot of preparation needed, so that may be... I think the risk on this thing my view is, the risk is very low, and even when there was a lot of outcry, I'm not sure how great the risk was, but then again, I fall more to that side...much more risk assessment kind of person than some people are. Like I don't like it they made me take off my shoes to get on the airplane, but one of the guys in the Sunday night group thinks that's totally great because terrorists are out to get us, but the chances that the terrorists want to get you is pretty slim. I want to keep my shoes on. I want to go back to the pre 911 way to get on the airplane because planes are still going down; yes, 911 was horrible, but all the money we spent on this, I don't know it's really worth the time and energy and money we've spent has made us all that safer. The risk was pretty low to begin with, and now, still low, maybe a little lower, but was it worth milking that extra .1 percent of security out of it?

ADVERTISING RISK AND SAFETY

“You know, it was widely advertised. So I think they did a good job.”

Risk information and its wide distribution played an important role in comforting a few of the people I interviewed. Most of the risk information distributed was uncritical, technocratic information given to the public without any chance for dialogue or meaningful debate. But this kind of monologue worked to keep most people more or less aware that the immediate danger of the stockpile was steadily diminishing, and some people made a distinction of risk according to what kinds of weapons were destroyed.

I asked Rose if she was aware of her zone. She quickly told me, “I did back when they were burning off the bad stuff.” I asked another participant, Anna, if the government and emergency officials were doing enough to keep the community safe, and she answered, “I think so. They went to people’s houses. You know, it was widely advertised. So I think they did a good job.” Interestingly, she equated communicating information with providing safety, but this was understandable when the progress at the incinerator was so conspicuous and widely available for consumption. Bob agreed. As he explained, this information works to calm the public. I asked him if the government did enough to keep people safe. He explained:

I think they’ve done a lot to make the people here to feel comfortable with it being here...But I think they did a good job at making the community comfortable with it going to be here more so than they convince people to let it come here. I mean that’s what I can remember.

This information had a cumulative effect. Asked about the information going to the public, Greg shared his thoughts:

I think as people starting hearing a little bit more about it, that it appeared to be not as bad as the doom and gloom people were saying, potentially so, but it probably wasn’t going to be a nightmare scenario.

Asked a similar question, Linda pinned responsibility onto the individual consuming the risk information. I asked if the community was informed about the incinerator and stockpile, and she answered:

As much as they could—as much as they wanted to be, let me put it that way. Like everything else, if you care about it—there were some folks that weren't going to pick up anything. They wanted to ignore it or didn't move. It's like everything else, if you wanted to be informed, you could be. It wasn't like the information wasn't out there.

Also asked if the community was prepared, Craig gave a slightly different focus. Still comforted, he placed peoples' fear in context:

I think people in general fear man-made chemicals and the damage they can do. We've all learned lessons from history from the fluoroscope and everything to do with the nuclear this and that have done terrible harm. So I understand people have fear and we've also seen a lot from big corporations releasing things into our water just because it was the cheaper thing to do. So I understand there's a lot of fear with that, but I also feel they have done a lot to do this responsibility as they can. I don't know how much of that is quelling peoples' fear or how much is real, but it seemed substantive.

In the end, this risk information effectively communicated to the public that plans were in place; that everything was under control. Craig explained:

So the way they let out the plans: there were a lot of TV commercials all the time for a long while. They had the little kids explaining they had their home plan, and their parents knew what they were going to do. That was very widespread there for a couple of years. So as a result, I felt really confident that things were going to be fine or at least if something went wrong, we had a plan to mitigate it.

Ironically, several participants felt that more information would be counterproductive to public safety. This was largely based in their commonly held assumption that people were inclined to panic in times of disaster, but assumption aside, several people mentioned this in the interviews. I asked Craig about the information coming from the County and emergency officials and his views on if this material was adequate. Seemingly stumped, he told me, “Uh, [pause] it seems to be. I couldn't come up with anything else that they could possibly do that might not

cause a hysteria [muted, short laugh].” Greg offered a similar sentiment about disclosure and panic, “Yeah, they [Calhoun County] could have done more; I think all it would have done is amped up peoples’ nerves, it probably would have amped up opposition, and I can understand the saying that ignorance is bliss”. Rob echoed this pessimistic sentiment, “I think the more they would do that [officials work to more fully inform the public], I think the more fear they would cause”. Wendy directly connected this kind of information to advancement of the opposition of incineration; she clearly saw this as a bad thing. I asked her about the media and its influence on the community. She explained that the media was an important—but possibly dangerous—influence in the community:

I think so, but in a dangerous way. Depending on what media outlet or newspaper, or the TV, you were getting so many conflicting messages, and I think that added to the fear and added to the public’s outrage. And if it had come from the government or you know, it would have meant more to the people. It wouldn’t have been so much of an outrage.

PERSONALIZING RISK AND SAFETY

“I went through this place, here’s what I can tell you. There are safeguards; it’s as safe as it can be.”

Not surprisingly, personally knowing someone that works at the Depot strongly influenced the people supporting the incinerator. This kind of relationship to the Depot influenced people for two main reasons. First, knowing people that work at the Depot humanized the project. This firsthand knowledge provided the largely mechanistic entity with some humanity. Second, people that knew employees at the complex were usually aware of how much training they received, and this awareness gave Depot employees an aura of professionalism. These factors worked together to engender trust and ultimately support for the incinerator. After

telling me she knows people working at the Depot, I asked Linda, “Does that make you more confident, knowing people out there?” She answered:

Yeah, like everything else, it gives you a personal view on it. It’s not just you know, you talk about the incinerator and you just think of a big furnace sitting out there, and until you know folks working out there, it puts a face to it. It’s not just a big piece of machinery or factory out there.

I asked another participant about her knowledge of Depot employees, “Do you think that’s changed your opinion one way or another, knowing people that work out there? Does that comfort you?” Without hesitation, Wendy responded:

I think so, because the people that work out there are very, you know, great individuals—I know them from church, and I grew up with their kids, so you know, you know someone *that* well, and you know they work out there, it gives you okay, because they’re there.

Because the Depot was so important economically, most participants knew Depot employees. Carla told me, “My friend, her mom, works out at the Depot. Some of my friends, their moms do”; others had family members that worked at the Depot. Not all participants talked in great detail about this, but some did. Anna told me about her family member working in the storage igloos:

When I was a kid, my [family member] worked in the igloos. He had, and I just remembered this, there was a pouch they had to wear, and he had to do the full suit and everything. And the thing is, if you worked out there for 38 years, you pretty much got to do a lot of different things. You didn’t stay in one job at the Depot for 38 years, so he worked in different areas during that time. But as a kid, I remember this pouch that they had to wear that was part of their suit, and he might have it in his truck when he picked us up from school or daycare or whatever, but it had all this stuff on it: a mask, I remember the mask, but there was a *long* syringe, I mean it was *huge*—it looked like a syringe you would give a horse, with a huge needle if they got exposure they would inject themselves with. It was just really scary, this mask and this huge needle that was in this pack, and you know, it was kind of freaky [laughing].

Knowing Depot employees certainly comforted several of the research participants. The closeness of the relationship certainly helps, but any degree of personal contact accomplished the

same effect: it comforted them. Interviewing Curtis, he told me about his role in placating the nervous parents of college freshmen:

And then um, the big thing was when they started really doing the large scale incineration of the stuff, I was already working here at the time, and it was in the news, and I was doing freshman orientation, so it was a big deal that we had to know enough about it. They educated us because the parents were going to ask: should I send my kids here because, are you detonating nuclear bombs just 30 miles down the road? And we were fortunate enough to have a guy on the team who was in ROTC, that was a colonel in the army, and he is a *great* guy, everybody loved him, and we had somebody come in and talk, and later on, he came, or he said look: I went through this place, here's what I can tell you. There are safeguards; it's as safe as it can be.

Personal experience with emergency management officials also comforted several research participants. This kind of experiential relationship provided a degree of realness to the people and agencies preparing emergency contingencies. Hesitantly comforted, Roberta described her experiences with the people working in emergency management:

I've been in the county EMA; I've seen the maps on the wall; they have those big projector things that have the plume distribution should an accident occur right now; the winds are doing this, and this is the way it would disperse.

Knowing employees of the Depot also worked to give the overall impression that the workers were highly competent professionals. Although this was not universal with all the participants I interviewed, this kind of awareness was significant in comforting many of those supporting incineration. I asked Bob if he knew people working at the Depot; he paused briefly and told me:

I know people there that work on the fire department and they are the highest trained HAZMAT firefighters that I know of in the country, and the security forces that are out there, they have pagers that if it goes off they get called in...So we do kind of have an upper leg as that goes. The security for the super bowl and the Olympics were trained at the center for domestic preparedness, so people who were involved in the gulf spill, they were a part of this emergency management agency here and the center for domestic preparedness, so we are fortunate as far as that goes to have those resources at our disposal here, so close by.

Several of the participants felt like the Depot workers were very careful with the dangerous work of incineration. Asking Wendy about this very point, she explained:

Yeah, and I think they've been very careful, and I know people that work on the incinerator, and they talk about how they are very safe, and they make sure everything is done up to code and properly. They take pride, and they know it's dangerous; they better do it right...they have to go through a lot of training before they can even go near it.

Tonya also made similar conclusions about the Depot workforce. I asked her about her level of concern with incineration, and she answered, "I wasn't concerned."

I asked, "And that was because mainly you thought they know what they're doing?"

She confidently smiled and said, "Yeah, and they were taking all the safety precautions that's necessary." Quite understandably, several people told me that they have to maintain faith in the ability of others. This makes perfect sense sociologically because so much of our contemporary lives depend on the basic competency of strangers. The incinerator was no different in this regard. Laughing about it, Simon replied, "Yeah. All I ... I have to have faith that our government and scientists know what they're doing [slight chuckle], at this point, you know?" He then provided a slight caveat:

You know, I have faith in scientists, but I don't have faith in people who manage scientists. You know what I mean? Scientists made the atomic bomb for the right reasons; it was used for the wrong reasons. I would hope the people handling this stuff know what they're doing or [are] well trained.

Echoing Simon, Vera said:

I guess I just have to have faith and confidence that the right people are there for the right job, and it's going to get done the proper way. I always thought this was safer to do what they were doing than put it in a big truck and cart it out of town.

FANTASY OBJECTS

“when I saw how flimsy or what the solution was, to me it didn’t seem like that big of a threat”

The distribution and subsequent consumption of disaster materials offered more certainty and comfort to a number of participants. This was most evident considering the dismal fate of the opposition movement. After telling me about the initial, negative reaction to the construction of the incinerator, I asked Tonya, “ So you said when it first came here, there was a pretty loud uproar?”

Tonya replied, “Yeah, nobody wanted it.”

“So, why did you think it [the uproar] went away?” I asked.

Seemingly perturbed, Tonya replied:

Well, I think that everybody out there was telling [us] how safe it was going to be, and they gave us all these kits and things, and the *zones*, and the maps and so on and so forth; where I live is the furthest away from the incinerator, so I didn’t have to worry that much about it. People that lived closer in were given more in their kit, and I can’t tell you what it was, but besides the plastic to seal the doors and a type of radio or something to alert them when something happened at the incinerator, which nothing ever did. They had to shut it down a couple of times because of incidents that happened out there that didn’t affect anybody else, but they repaired it, and everything’s fine.

Many other people felt that everything was just fine. Asked if the community were prepared for an emergency, Craig explained:

As such there has been a lot of emergency preparedness packets that came around in the last few years which has declined a lot lately, but over the last five years there has been a lot about knowing your zones, being prepared, calendars coming out, you know emergency radios being made available, and because of that, I *feel* there is safety, and there is preparedness for it.

Asked about these same mailings, Harold recalled:

It seems like they distributed out calendars in pretty colors that...in a nice way said, don't worry about things. But I don't remember a letter or presentation sent out saying here's what's out there, this is what we are doing, and this is how we are going to do it, and this is why we feel it is safe to do it this way. There wasn't anything like that. If there was, I didn't receive it; I didn't search it out; I didn't care.

In particular, the infamous duct tape and plastic worked fairly well to calm a number of people I interviewed. Tonya explained the basic premise:

They first sent out letters and things to go pick up your stuff out at the Fort to seal your doors and oh, what else? I can't even remember. So I did that, and I picked up my kit, and took her home; I think I measured it, and made sure I had the right amount of plastic or whatever it was they gave us, and I'm trying to remember what else they gave us, but I think you know some people are so worried about it, but I wasn't worried: I really wasn't.

I asked her a follow-up question, "With the kit, did you have to pick a room? Is that how it works?" She answered:

Yeah, you have to pick a room where you're going to stay in, and make sure you've got supplies like water and canned food and stuff like that, and in my house [laughing], you pick a room without any windows, and about the only place in the house without any windows was the laundry room and the one bathroom [laughing], so you didn't really have much choice...I wasn't concerned.

Other respondents were also not concerned. Knowing Vera works relatively close to the incinerator, I asked her if she received one of the shelter kits:

Yes. Matter of fact, on Noble Street, we got our kit and all that, *there* before we got it at the house, and I'm what, six blocks from work? So it was interesting to see, they started with the closest with the zones and worked their way out. We got the alert radio and all the information, somebody came in and set up the radio and went over things with us, and I felt like we were as prepared as you can be.

And others felt fine with this solution. Investigating this, I asked Linda, “About the duct tape and plastic, did you feel pretty good about that? Did you feel confident if something were to happen, you were going to get out okay?”

Yeah, you know, I didn’t have a problem with it. I was fairly content with what they gave us and the information about how to evacuate, but I felt fairly confident in what we were told.

And this solution of sheltering in place was exactly what people were instructed to do. Citing her friend “in the know”, Rose told me:

He did chemical training, so he trained people for what to do if something wrong happened, but he would you know, tell us horror stories: oh, this is what happens if mustard gas hits you, and this is what happens when this hits you, and I got the impression that if something did happen, you were better off not trying to get in your car and outrun it, you are better off staying inside and duct taping everything.

Interestingly, the simplicity of this solution worked to calm those who believe in it. In many ways, this sentiment revealed the fantastic nature of these risk materials—these safety objects.

Greg explained:

When I saw how flimsy or what the solution was, to me it didn’t seem like that big of a threat because if some plastic and duct tape was going to save me, then to me that’s not that big of a deal. That’s how I felt.

MEDIA FRAMING OF RISK AND SAFETY

“The public was educated and not just me.”

Several respondents told me the media provided a sense of comfort concerning incineration. This was in part because the information conveyed to the public was largely technocratic in detail. Concerning the incinerator, Greg explained, “they’re taking care of business, and what little I’ve heard in the newspapers has been positive: just giving updates on

how far they are going and stuff like that.” Asked about the progress at the incinerator, Linda gave a similar, glowing account, “well I know it’s finished up because what I read in the papers, the stuff they could get out—all that’s gone. She continued:

And they [the media] were good on getting that information out and keeping it fairly up to date when they were doing the burns, but since the major stuff got taken care of, you don’t hear much about it.

The sheer amount of coverage also worked to comfort some individuals. Craig told me of the widespread media campaign:

So when people did have their emergency preparedness plans and their zones, I had the zone on a thing, but honestly, I didn’t put a lot of trouble to memorize the details because I thought well, it will be on radio, on television, it will be easy to find.

Other participants confirmed the effectiveness of the media campaign. Reflecting on how the media cover the incinerator, Martha explained:

The construction process did had some bloopers, but when they finally got it up and going, and it started burning, and paper reported on it every time there was a little blip, it made headlines in the *Anniston Star*, but the whole process went particularly smooth, and one of the reasons I think most of the community was fine was because they had so much community outreach, the army did; they did that right: so much community outreach.

Perhaps a part of this comfort stemmed from the assumption that the community would act with some coordination and common purpose; again, Craig:

I really feel like it was organized and planned. Because they had blanketed the radio and the television and the mailing, at least everyone had heard of it and there wouldn’t be widespread chaos and people trying to break down my door to get in. The public was educated and not just me.

SAFE IN MY BACKYARD

“There isn’t a thick, yellow fog hanging over everything, and everyone’s dead.”

Many of those comforted by the incinerator had knowledge of other locations where the Army successfully incinerated chemical weapons. This information worked in significant ways to calm their concerns, and although tautological, it worked as a powerful rationale to keep incineration as the primary form of chemical weapons disposal. Wendall communicated the basic idea:

They [the DOD] just decided this [incineration] is the way it should be done, and they used it in that place in Utah and some place out in the Pacific, and they thought it was the way to go. And they were pretty successful at those places, so they wanted to duplicate the process here.

The fact that these locations already maintain established incinerators worked well to counter accusations and claims that the military is experimenting in Anniston. I asked Greg about his support of incineration, and he explained:

I might not have felt that way if this was the first time they’d ever done it, but since there were at least two other places where they had, I felt okay with it...I think at the time that there were other methods that were being thrown out there, and from what I remember though, it seemed like the incinerator or incineration seemed to be...[pause] to work best or at least had a proven track record.

CSEPP, in particular, produced and communicated this information about the other incinerators in their public relations efforts. Bob explained:

Well, they held multiple, multiple meetings. They presented all the studies...So they had a lot of information to provide to the community to show them that it was potentially safe, to do...

Asked about his feelings on the incinerator and its risk to the community, Bob referenced this commonly known CSEPP material:

They've had incinerators, what's the one on the island? Um, [Name Removed]'s dad used to work there. [Name Removed] always had that lighter. But there's other incinerators that have been running for decades and haven't had any incidents at, so you know, they've got plenty of studies that they've done.

And this was a particularly powerful narrative against the backdrop of the opposition to the incinerator. The opposition essentially asserted that incineration was extremely dangerous, and to many respondents, they never communicated a clear alternative. These narratives providing examples of "successful" incineration were quite convincing to many. Even though Will opposed incineration, he told me:

There was a late math professor here [Name Removed]. I remember when he observed that I was in the no incineration movement, told me: well, you know, this technology, they've built these two other places; they've learned; this is third generation technology; this is going to be very safe, and of course [Name Removed] was ex-military, smart guy, and so far its been relatively safe. There isn't a thick, yellow fog hanging over everything, and everyone's *dead*.

This sentiment became amplified when coming from people within close social circles.

Anna explained:

Actually at the time the incinerator came or was coming, my [family member] was working in safety at the Depot, so he had actually visited some of the other sites like the Johnston Island and the Tooele Utah, and those other sites; so I had information that the average family in Anniston didn't have. That this was really the safest way. Transporting it on trucks was risky, and sitting there was really, really risky just sitting there.

But perhaps in a more academic sense, knowledge of other locations worked to give some people a sense of solace. Vera put the incinerator in perspective this way:

I guess we chose to stay here for one reason or the other. You choose where you live now. Of course y'all are living there because of school, and then you will work toward getting where you want to settle for your lifetime, but if something goes totally crazy and doesn't work out, you can pick up stakes and move somewhere else. I guess I feel like if you aren't comfortable where you are, then get where you are comfortable. And I guess that's the way I look at the incinerator and stuff. It doesn't bother me. It doesn't worry me to the point

where I want to put up a for sale sign in the front yard and go somewhere else.
The grass isn't greener on the other side.

Indeed, respective of how many incineration sites there were nationally, the grass may not be greener in other locations.

SAFE SYSTEMS

“it'd be almost impossible for something to happen”

Individuals comforted by the incinerator often brought up the redundancies built into the process of chemical incineration. This narrative was rather pervasive in those I interviewed.

Asking Wendy if she feels the incinerator were safe, she told me:

Yeah, I feel really safe about it, you know? I don't think there's a high possibility that would happen because I'm sure they have so many safeguards in place that something drastic would have to happen for that [a disaster] to happen.

Addressing some of the initial problems at the site, Greg echoed Wendy's basic sentiment:

I think early on there were a couple of times they shut down temporarily because they were running into a problem here or there, but to me it seemed just standard operational stuff, and working out some of the kinks, but there were so many fail-safes, so it seemed fine.

I inquired to Bob about the safety of operations at the Depot. Smiling a rather large grin, he explained, “I do know for a fact that redundant after redundant system for safety on the facility, that once the first one goes off, you know, people will respond, and they are highly trained.” As before, this comforting factor became even more convincing when it comes from someone close to the respondent. Feeling confident in the system, Sarah shared:

Well, from people I've talked to that work out there, there's so many ways that they have...safety things...this one has this to do, and they can't do anything until this is done, and they've really...you hear all that and realize there would be no way, it'd be almost impossible for something to happen when they were

transferring stuff—you know, with as much as they had, and they've really gotten it pat-down as far as operations *right now*.

Curtis also conveyed this personal connection and the redundancies at the Anniston incinerator:

No, I don't know a whole lot about it, but like I said, [Name Removed], the colonel, he told us how they did it. I remember, he described the whole process, and I remember imaging there were these multiple doors, multiple sealed doors they would have to go through to incinerate this one munition or whatever, and there were these big igloos that were keeping it all in, but that's been god, it's been a long time. I don't remember now all of the details, but at the time, I could picture enough of it in my head that it made sense from his descriptions. But not everybody had a guy who had taken the tour I guess.

Asked about the possibility of a catastrophic event at the incinerator, Simon explained the unlikelihood of such an event. As he put it, the real danger would be from a terrorist attack on the stockpile:

These kinds of weapons are not, from what I understand, and it would be hard to think this, they aren't kept in a large vat. They are kept in very small doses separate from one another. If you dropped one, sure it could cause a lot of trouble, but it's not going to kill the state. You know what I mean? I don't think it would be a catastrophic, ecological disaster if one canister of something springs a leak. They've got containment protocols and stuff, you know. It would take a...coordinated attack to make that stuff happen. It would have to be intentionally done.

Asked the same question, Greg also saw a large disaster as unlikely:

I knew someone in military intelligence, and I asked him about it, and he assured me that unless they just *totally screw up*, there wasn't really anything to worry about. It would have to be something completely abnormal. So I was okay with that.

MITIGATING FACTORS

“You know they say time heals all wounds.”

A few, additional factors provided comfort to certain individuals. These mitigating factors included the weather, distance, and time. Vera compared the dangers of incineration to

the dangers of weather and tornado activity. Asking her, “Did you guys take any special precautions? You said you knew people that did...” She did not even wait to let me finish my question:

No. No. No. I don’t even do that when a hurricane or tornado, when they say we may have remnants of a hurricane—forget it. I don’t go fight at the grocery store or building stocks or whatever. I’m weird that way [laugh].

Craig intellectualized this comparison to weather and the recent tornadoes that ravaged Tuscaloosa that previous Spring:

Yeah, in large part people, we’ve done some reading on this, a matter of fact [Name Removed] talking about risk and fear. That our fear is greater than the actual risk, especially when it’s a bizarre death—something that can do crazy harm. We downplay the danger of driving around in our own car, but we up it with having an airplane accident or whatever. I think people may have a bloated fear of chemical weapons and things like that, and not so much when getting into a shelter with tornadoes, which is such a topical thing right now unfortunately...I thought well, when is that ever going to happen.

Because of the very physical nature of chemical weapons, atmospheric conditions play a large role in their potency, effect, and longevity. I asked Greg about the possibilities of a disaster or accident at the Depot. Knowledgeable of the somewhat fragile nature of the munitions, Greg explained:

So as far as just a basic leak or something like that, I didn’t think too much of it because when the emergency management person came by, a lot of discussion revolved around the weather, and that it would depend on which way the wind was blowing; it would depend on what the temperature was outside, and it would depend on whether or not it was dry, wet, humid, or raining, and I remember one of the computer science faculty saying something along the lines of, well let me get this straight: you mean to tell me, if all of a sudden there is an accident, and if the wind is blowing this way, and if it’s not raining, and it’s not hot, then I have x amount of minutes to either hide in place or get in the car and drive away, and it just seemed like there were a lot of ifs involved, and when they were giving us calculations as to how long something would be dangerous, I kind of assumed that if something’s going to happen, I want it to happen in the Summer time, because it seemed like most of that stuff would be dissipated enough to where it wouldn’t be a problem.

When I asked Roberta about these projections and calculations, she acknowledged their predictive value, but she did not discount the uncertainty involved:

Yeah, they are more or less meteorological items: the winds blowing, and if an aerosol was dispersed, it would be picked up by these winds, and because of the velocity and all of that, it would spread out like this, and because they are based on meteorological-weather-type stuff, yeah they are pretty accurate. Now would a chemical release act the way that they say it's going to? Is it heavier than a certain air molecule, or some of the stuff will stay it will stay close to the ground because it's heavier; some stuff says it's lighter...

Other people found comfort in the amount of distance between them and the incinerator.

Asked about the possibility of a disaster in Anniston, Simon confidently told me, "I think we are far enough away to escape the carnage." Asked the same question, Craig explained:

I think if I had lived in Weaver or 5 miles away or less from the epicenter, I would have been a lot more concerned. As it was, it was hard to imagine something—something would have to be very large to reach us with any potency. So that was a big thing. I would have been exponentially more afraid the closer I got to Anniston—to the Depot.

A part of Craig's confidence and sense of certainty was due to the fact that he lives in Jacksonville—relatively far away from the incinerator, and this was an understandable comfort. But his sense of safety was also due to his access to information on the possible projections and predictions of an incident at the incinerator. Explaining this, he told me:

And I had, when I was in school here, there was a project that the lab where I worked was doing, it was about modeling plume clouds in case there was a...in case it did get out. How would the plume spread? So I had a different kind of view I guess, where most people were like they're incinerating weapons—chemical weapons, and they could be deadly, because either if you just hear it in the news, either you disregard it and you don't care, so you're not afraid, or you don't understand enough, and you are afraid because you don't know, and it sounds very dangerous, but in my case, when they did the plume modeling and stuff like that, the chances were: if you were on the Depot and something happened, probably not a good time for you, and if you lived kind of close to the Depot, within a mile or two, probably not a good time for you, but in Jacksonville where we are how many miles away we are, the confluence of events that would have to happen to make anything toxic enough to get here in

enough quantity was so slim, not to mention all the safeguards they had taken to make it safe, so I was never afraid of it, and I always told my parents [of students], and I'm not afraid, and I live here. I don't think there's anything to be concerned about.

But his confidence came through the realization of the nature of these chemical munitions. As he put it, distance matters with chemical weapons:

The distance and the realization that this stuff is only bad when it's concentrated. This stuff is made to drop on people [giggle] that are very near the drop site. It's not made to affect people 10 miles down the road, so you have to have a pretty good concentration, so my perception was that the danger for us here [in Jacksonville] was pretty low.

Others linked distance with the possibility for an evacuation. Living fairly close to a major highway, Bob invoked his ability to make a hasty escape:

I think that I would feel more comfortable where I am, being as far away, and having routes of egress; there's lots: 431, you know, if you are Jacksonville, you can go out to, you can go out 204 to get to 431; 431 is a fairly large road with a good speed limit and lots of places to go to get away from it.

Greg echoed this sentiment. Asked what he would do if there were an incident at the Depot, he looked to the window, commenting:

If I was at work, I felt okay, for different reasons. Here I was far enough away; all I have to do is get on 21 and head north, no big deal. I would have more than enough time...I probably felt more comfortable with just where I lived and what my routes were to get out. I could get on a highway in the matter of a few minutes...in an unpopulated area.

Distance had a similar calming effect to the few people I interviewed that live close to the incinerator. However, this effect was rather counterintuitive. The comfort came from the fact that the incinerator would destroy the weapons, and it had little overall connection to the logic of those living farther away. Irene explained:

There's a big group in Jacksonville that's still against the incinerator. We've always laughed and joked about it. You know? They're sitting up there in Jacksonville thinking it's a terrible thing, and we've been living there outside the

gate for fifty years now, knowing they are there, and you know, kind of glad they are getting rid of everything.

Time also worked to calm concerns about the incinerator. Acknowledging the problems with this kind of rationale, Wendy still told me, “I kind of feel like, which is such a bad way of looking at it, that if something was going to happen, it would have already, which I know it can still happen, but it doesn’t really scare me any more.” She continued, “After so many years, [if] something was gonna happen, it would of.” Others told me that as time passes, the incinerator became less and less important to them. I asked Carla, “Is it [the incinerator] something you think about much? Smiling, she answered:

Not any more...Probably because it was so big at one point. Do this, get that, you’re in this zoning area, we’re starting to destroy these chemicals right now, you know, after 911, it was on a lot of people’s minds, but I mean, you keep going further and further, and there hasn’t been anything, you know, *big* that’s happening, so it’s just died down...we barely thought about it after a couple of years, but when it happened [being built] everybody thought about it.

Vera also felt this way. Asked if she ever thought about the incinerator or the stockpile, she told me:

No. I remember when I was in high school, this is like 10 years ago, I remember that’s when they were still burning stuff, so I remember then when I heard about it, I felt kind of concerned, but as I got older, and I don’t know they’ve stopped or gotten through what they were supposed to be burning, or if they’re almost done, I think I even heard that if they had anything left, it’s not the really bad stuff. They burned what was really bad, so no. It’s not something I really think about.

Asked about the progress at the incinerator, Bob recalled the community’s transition from opposition and unease into acceptance:

I don’t remember that I do. [Pause] Like I said, initially everybody was kinda opposed to it. I don’t think anybody was like, [sarcastically happy] yeah let’s burn chemicals here! And I think that the longer that they’ve done it without any major incident: I think there was one point where something—a truck or something like that broke down, and something fell off, but there wasn’t a spill or anything, but it seems like the longer it goes, the less people think about it.

Many others communicated how time eased their fears. Asked about his concerns, Craig told me:

No I'm not [concerned with incineration] mainly because it's almost over. I think if it had just begun, if were a few weeks before it started, I might have a lot more fear. It's something you get comfortable with. It's been 6 months and nothing has happened, and that will be safe...My sense of it is that things are coming to a close and it's becoming no longer a big deal.

The passage of time also worked to dissolve opposition. Initially against the incinerator, Roberta described her change of heart:

I don't think about it a lot now, but when it was first here, I was against it. I felt that neutralization would have been a better alternative. After living in the shadow of it so long, I don't think about it...it hasn't killed me yet. So...

Asked if she worried about the incinerator, Anna summed up this sentiment perfectly:

Well, we're on the back end of incineration luckily, but I felt like it was really the safest way to dispose of agent out there, and it now that we are more years into it, I think it has proven to be a very safe method of disposal.

Vera felt the same way. In her words:

It's been there almost ten years isn't it? It's not on the forefront anymore. Now we're worrying about city council fighting [laughing] or something else has come along. But in the beginning it was a big part of people's consciousness...Time. You know they say time heals all wounds. Yeah. It's time.

FATALISM

“when your numbers up, your numbers up.”

Lastly, some of the individuals I interviewed found comfort in surrendering to a sense of fatalism. This kind of sentiment was easy to understand. Living right next to something so potentially dangerous was difficult to rationalize. Being so helpless against the danger, it makes sense to surrender control to a higher power. Asked about these dangers, Vera calmly told me:

I think sometimes people worry too much. I really and truly do. I mean, in your line of work, you deal with a lot more of that than I do, but sometimes I think people are over-panicky. They are really gloom and doom, and like I said a few minutes ago, I guess being a paramedic and nurse in my life, I feel like the time and date is there for your last breath, and when it is, it is. And there's not a whole lot anybody can do about it. When it's your time to meet your maker, you are going to meet him. So it's best to be prepared for that. I just think that some people go overboard sometimes with their thoughts and let things get away, their imagination takes over.

She continued to say, "I figure God knows when it's your time, and when your numbers up, your numbers up. So I never really worried about it, but I think the majority of the public, it was a big part of their minds." Interestingly, Vera criticized those who can imagine the possibilities of calamity with the stockpile and incinerator. Strongly supporting the incinerator, Martha also remained critical of those imagining the possibilities:

I didn't think it [an accident] was going to happen, and if it did happen, I didn't think it was going to be major. There was way too much dramatization of what would happen if something went wrong.

Collectively, the surrender of control to a higher authority and the discounting of imagination worked to calm some individuals. Again, it was exceedingly difficult to seriously consider the possibilities of potential danger contained within the stockpile and incinerator. Sometimes people try not to think about it.

BLISSFUL IGNORANCE AND DENIAL

"I just pushed it out of my mind."

Many of the participants supporting incineration acknowledged their ignorance concerning the incineration process. I do not mean this in a bad way, as I also lived extremely close to the Depot for many years, and I never bothered to learn anything about incineration, and I certainly never investigated into the nature of the stockpile in Anniston. This was for a host of reasons, but primarily, I did not want to know. Looking back, I think I was in a state of denial,

and that denial kept me from actually coming to terms with the potential dangers of chemical weapons. I lived on military bases all through my childhood. There is no way to live a decent, normal life if I had seriously contemplated the dangers of my environment.

I asked Dorothy if the incinerator were safe. Recognizing her ignorance, she answered, “I do, but of course, like I said, I don’t know a whole lot about it.” Other participants had a vague idea, but that was about it. Prompted to explain the incineration process, Wendy told me, “Yeah, I know it’s canisters, and they do something with canisters, but other than that, I have no idea.”

To most people, the incinerator was a complete mystery. I asked Harriet about her awareness of the complex. She leaned forward to explain:

It is so far off the radar. You do not hear anything about it except the first Tuesday of every month, and one of those alarms is a chemical excursion alarm—I believe they call it—it sounds like aliens are coming. They should really tell newcomers that they test the alarms every first Tuesday of the month because my first Tuesday was a scary experience.

I asked Simon if he ever thinks about the incinerator. Breaking into laughter, he told me:

That’s a good question. I don’t! [laughing] I do not. It’s not that big of a... it’s not made that big of a deal around here. There’s no one putting flyers in my mailbox or knocking on my door or anything. It’s not that I feel safe, I feel ignorant. You know what I mean? I just don’t know anything. So I don’t think about it.

Jared returned to his childhood to explain this kind of ignorance. I, too, remember the commonplace explosions that would shake our homes weekly. He recalled:

Yeah, I didn’t understand chemical warfare when I was little of course, and I didn’t understand until we were in high school or middle school exactly what that base was for you know. When you are a kid, you don’t think of chemical weapons, just guns, plus the range was always out there booming, so you never really think about that sort of thing.

While many supporters of incineration remained ignorant of the incinerator, other respondents went beyond ignorance. Some were in outright denial. This kind of denial is

completely understandable, and to a large extent, I was also in denial about the danger of the stockpile when I lived in the area. I asked Dorothy if she thought of the incinerator often. She told me:

It [thoughts of the incinerator] used to be right when they started talking about using it, and what would we do, but you can't sit around and dwell on stuff like that: doomsday, you know? The chances getting killed in a car wreck is higher than that. So I just try not to think about it.

She tried not to think about it because as some level, she realized the serious implications if something were to go wrong. I asked her about these dangerous possibilities. Pausing for a second, she explained:

I remember back when we got first got that stuff: the calendar with the routes and all if we had to evacuate. I remember thinking, well my mother was invalid, and my sister had to sit in her power chair, and she couldn't walk, and I did have, what if something like that happened in the middle of the night; how could I get my mother and my sister to safety; you know, what would I do? I had to do like you said, just get it out of my mind. You know, if you sit around and think about stuff like that, which will never occur, you know, so I just pushed it out of my mind.

Jared noticed these tendencies in the general population. I asked him why the incinerator was built in Anniston. Citing denial, he answered:

People here are willing to sell that kind of safety for jobs, and because they are so good at pretending that's nothing wrong...they probably think they'll be okay...because they are good at glossing themselves over; they are going to think the best; they don't want to be scared because they know they're going to be staying here.

And Jared goes on to tell me that the main factor contributing to this kind of denial was economic. In an almost conspiratorial tone, he continued:

People around here are like, "It will be okay." The government would never do anything to put us in harm's way, and we need jobs because they closed Fort McClellan, and it was that; they don't like to think that the government doesn't really care about them.

Greg extended this logic into justifying secrecy. I asked him if local officials did enough to prepare the public for an emergency, and he surprised me with the frankness of his answer, “Yeah, they [Calhoun County] could have done more; I think all it would have done is amped up peoples’ nerves, it probably would have amped up opposition, and I can understand the saying that ignorance is bliss.” Harriet understood this level of denial somewhat differently. Asked about the risks coming from the Depot, she explained, “Oh yeah, yeah, I mean, we don’t even talk about it, so how can you really resist it? [laughing] It’s and accepted part of the risks *of life*; I don’t think anyone would call it a risk any more.”

To a certain degree, this illustrated the banality of the risk in Anniston. This was so normalized that Carla told me that, “some people don’t get anything at all because they think nothing’s going to happen, and if it happens, oh I can’t do anything about it, so I guess I’m going to die. I don’t think that way! [laugh]”

Wendy explained this same phenomenon, but she related it more to denial, “Maybe people feel the way I feel. After so many years, [if] something was gonna happen, it would of, and you’re scared at first because it’s all in the media, but once the media stops covering it, you think of the other issues coming up, so it’s pushed back.”

Simon rationalized this denial against the “risk society” in which we live. I found this explanation to be very honest and truthful to my own experiences in Anniston. He told me:

But it’s everywhere. Not to mention, I would say, the majority of people around here can’t afford to move. If you have a decent job, you can’t afford to uproot your family and move to another state. So you push it out of your mind. You can’t handle that kind of anxiety.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter described the extent to which the organizational production of symbolic safety worked in Anniston. Despite the potential risk posed by the stockpile and incinerator, many participants in the study found some level of comfort and safety even with their close proximity to the Depot.

This comfort came directly through the consumption and internalization of symbolic safety. These participants shared the official definitions of risk. They consistently recited the narratives found in the distributed mailings, calendars, media reports, and official talking points coming from incineration proponents. They praised the Depot for its efficiency and safety. They candidly discounted alternatives to incineration, and they denounced those few who opposed the incinerator. Many of these supporters knew people working at the Depot, and they referenced successful incinerating projects in other locations.

These supporters also valued the distributed sheltering kits, masks, filters, and emergency radios. As previously described, these fantasy objects effectively reified the fantasy documents (Clarke 1999) outlying the official definitions of risk and proposed solutions. As with fantasy documents, these people did not entirely believe or disbelieve that they worked (Clarke and Perrow 1996:1041), but this contradiction was not an issue with these people. These objects were not produced or consumed for their utility. These products signified that something was being done; that the social order remained successfully intact. Borrowing from the words of Baudrillard (1990), these objects offer the simulacrum of safety. Consuming these objects reaffirms that the social order remains legitimate, effective, and trustworthy. This consumption genuinely comforted many participants in this study.

Lastly, some of the supporters defined the situation in fatalistic terms. A few felt safe by remaining blissfully ignorant about the stockpile and incinerator. Others actively denied the threat of a disaster. As we will see in the next chapter, participants also maintained some degree of skepticism toward the official definitions of risk and safety.

CHAPTER VII

LOSING THE SALE: PUBLIC SKEPTICISM OF RISK AND SAFETY IN ANNISTON

While a number of the people I interviewed reported a degree of comfort with the risk information and materials produced by incineration proponents, others felt genuinely discomforted by these same efforts. This chapter describes those skeptical of the incineration proponents. Simply put, these people were not comforted by the efforts by emergency officials, and they did not buy into the comforts found in symbolic safety.

Skeptical participants did not share official definitions of risk, and they did not believe in the fantasy documents constructed to inform and calm them. This sense of discomfort stemmed from an overall distrust of government, military, and corporations in general, and this skepticism extended into their perception of the very products and information provided to mitigate a disaster. These respondents did not value the official line, and they certainly did not express any confidence in the sheltering materials or evacuation planning. Many of these research participants saw the evacuation plans and sheltering materials as simply unrealistic, or at the very least, untested. Unlike supporters of the incinerator, these participants did not deny the

possibility of a chemical disaster, and they fully expected chaos and panic from such an event. In some ways, these people were more willing to imagine the possibilities of something going wrong at the Depot. These individuals openly questioned the motives of the military, and they recalled the purported problems—not successes—at the other incineration locations.

Clearly, skeptical respondents wholly rejected the fantasy documents and objects distributed to the community. This is in part to their respect of the lethality of chemical weapons and the population density of the surrounding area. These participants did not expect that an untested evacuation could work, and they doubted the ability of the citizens to properly shelter in place. Overall, skeptics felt there was little that could mitigate a serious disaster in the area, and if something serious were to really happen, they believed that many people would die horrible deaths.

This chapter outlines the failures of incineration proponents to calm some of the public. These are accounts of people that were not convinced of the existence of symbolic safety; these skeptics did not share in official definitions of risk. They challenged the legitimacy of the existing social order, and they felt disturbed by incineration in Anniston.

LACK OF PREPAREDNESS

“that’s all a security blanket. They’ve done enough to calm people down.”

Talking to respondents about the preparedness of the community, several expressed concerns about the prospects of something bad really happening. I asked Jared if the community was ready for an accident at the Depot and if emergency officials did enough to prepare the community. In a deadpan manner, he answered:

Absolutely not. Zero percent. They put up that crap from the beginning from what I gathered, and how scared they are around here, they were probably pumped up for what they were supposed to do, but that’s it, nothing else.

Roberta also saw the disconnection between the informing efforts of emergency preparedness and the gravity and heavy requirements of a real event. Asked about the community and their preparedness, she explained:

They've been educated, yes. They've been prepared as far as education and public information and that type of thing. Um, if it actually happened, no. Even after all the time and money that's gone into it, I don't think so. We still have real limited numbers on first responders as far as any type of HAZMAT; let's face it, we don't have the best HAZMAT team around here. [unintelligible] A lot of the firefighters are volunteer firefighters, the only reason they are is to hang out at the fire station, have a little club, and I don't mean to be negative, there are some good volunteer firefighters out there, but anyway...

I asked Sarah about the possibilities of a disaster or an accident in Anniston, and she compared this possibility to the community's reaction to other, more natural events. Concerning the chances of a good response, she countered:

It would be great if it could work like that; you know that it wouldn't. If you'd been around anybody when they have a tornado, or for god's sake, when power goes out, there's no safety mechanisms there, too many things can happen. This won't know what that is doing. You know?

Harriet equated this lack of a coordinated response with a lack of basic infrastructure. Many of the communities adjacent to the Depot have numerous, winding roads. There are no community shelters, and even if there were, it would be difficult to impossible to coordinate a response in real time. I asked her if the plans were adequate; she quickly responded:

Adequate, if I would call it adequate, I'd say it would save their life, and so I would have to say no. We would need more roads for more evacuation, maybe more shelters of some kind, so even if they have access to what zone they're in, the kit, and there's an alarm, I don't call that adequate. I don't think, maybe I'm wrong, maybe your research will show this, I don't think that anybody thinks [laugh] it's adequate. And I don't know what you could do to make it that way, aside new roads and shelters.

Other respondents reported discomfort in the lack of good information coming from government officials and the Department of Defense. I asked Harold about the information he

received. He told me that, “They informed the public of the surface of probabilities...it was only what was necessary.” Asked about the amount and quality of information, Harriet revealed that she thought, “There was *more* community dissention than got press, talking to students, that’s what I hear.” She continued to tell me that:

The *Anniston Star* I would say is the best information. As far as radio, I know out in [City Removed], I can’t get the JSU station because of the distance, and I guess the tower isn’t tall enough, so immediate information, no; I think our communication system, like if something were to happen, is an alarm—it’s after the fact. They will blow the alarm for us to move, but to what’s going on, I don’t feel like we get good information.

Asked the same question, Roberta outright accused them of lying:

I do remember public service announcements: the jest was, [in a tough voice] well, now we’ve got most of the nasty stuff out, which they’d hadn’t got most of the nasty stuff out, they were still burning the really nasty stuff, they were using that as a little perk to make it sound a lot nicer for people to go pick up their shelter in place kits, and that’s all I’m going to say about that.

Sarah questioned the intention of all the emergency planning and materials. She asked me:

And why spend all that money? I kept thinking you know, I didn’t believe in them, but I think people really and truly...a lot of people really wanted all that stuff. They wanted it. They felt more protected if they had all this equipment and everything. It was something that would make them feel like they were taken care if they had the phone system...they would do something, you know? It’s P.R [in a higher tone, smiling]...you know?

Sarah saw the efforts as a public relations ploy: something to make the community feel better about themselves. Accusing the community of being in denial, she continued:

They have workshops all the time and spend so much money on all this, but it’s just, you always got these, they send out these calendars that you get at city hall and all that: Be prepared, be prepared, find out what zone you’re in, know what to do. You got all this stuff. Call this number, and everything they could do. People think, well gosh, then we are alright, where they know we’re not. You know. Everybody knows, it’s just false...making yourself think you are all right.

Talking to Will, he revealed similar feelings. I asked him if he thought the materials and plans were adequate for the community's safety. Looking upward, he paused and said:

No. It's all this stuff, all the warning system and the radios, everything, the home emergency preparedness kits and all that, it's all...that's all...like I say, that's all a security blanket. They've done enough to calm people down. They've done enough to, I guess silence the opposition. When the incinerator went in, the anti-incineration movement ended.

PUBLIC DISTRUST AND LACK OF CONFIDENCE

“But of course I'm sure they're making more of those weapons somewhere, so we'll have to do it again later.”

People discomfited by the risk information and materials shared a distrust of government officials and the military. To a certain degree, they felt as if the government misrepresented the truth, and some told me that the government and Department of Defense lied to the public. Remembering the disruptive effects of Fort McClellan's closure, Will expressed his thoughts on the military's attitude towards his community:

Oh, the military didn't give a rat's ass about how anyone in community felt about this. They didn't give really a rat's ass about closing the Fort. They closed the Fort; they put in an incinerator that everyone opposed. They did two things that there was really a large outcry against: They closed the Fort, and then they built the incinerator. Nobody really wanted either of those things. [long pause] Is there more I should say? [laughing]

Also cognizant of the devastation after the Fort's closing, Jared felt much the same as Will. Asked about the motives of government officials, he lamented:

Yeah, I think about it because the same people out there running it, they have the same attitude of the people working at that place: they don't give a crap about anything except for themselves and what they can get; not all of them, but a lot of them, so it's troublesome.

Acknowledging that most of the opposition to the incinerator came from outspoken professors at Jacksonville State University, Greg explained why this segment of the population distrusted the military so much:

I think there is amongst a lot of faculty in particular, I think a little bit of a hesitancy...you know it's ironic, for all the bleeding heart liberal labels attached to university faculty, and this label of being socialist, there is a tremendous distrust of the federal government and especially the United States military, I mean the military-industrial complex, as something to be feared by a lot of faculty. They just don't trust, so I think in part anything dealing with the United States government, as it applies to the United States military is...a red flag always goes up, and so...

Intrigued, I interrupted him with a quick follow-up, "Why do you think they distrust the military?" He paused momentarily and told me:

The military's attitude has always been that it's not so much the means, it's the end. And if people die or get hurt along the way, well there's going to be acceptable losses. You look at even the way things are described going on in the Middle East. If somebody dies, it's collateral damage. Hold on [he takes a phone call]. You know when people die, it's collateral damage. When my father fought in world war two, he was in Patton's third army. He didn't like that because he said Patton had little regard for human life. All that mattered was winning. So there's this thing of, well we've got to win, and what's the acceptable amount of loss? The bombing of Japan with atomic bombs, it's always been: well look at how many millions of lives were saved, or how many hundreds of lives were saved. Yes we killed this many *but*, you know? It's that kind of mentality. I think the United States military, if there was all of a sudden an accident or something, and people did get sick or hurt, it would be framed in a way saying yeah, but if we didn't do anything, the outcome would have been far worse than this. And for a lot of academics, they don't like that. They see the military as falling into that argument too readily, too easily instead of searching out alternative ways of doing things, and certainly I'm guessing there were alternative ways of getting rid of these chemical weapons, I just don't remember it being a big topic of conversation.

Harriet communicated her skepticism of the military, but she was mainly weary of people claiming expertise:

I'm not a big trusting, *especially* of the experts. Maybe I'm an anomaly of that working-class mantra, or had enough experience or enough experiences, not a

whole bunch, just to be like: maybe they always know what they're doing. [said in a skeptical, higher-pitched voice]

Others felt that the military was outright lying to the community. Some of the respondents felt that the military will ignore the legal prohibitions on the importation of new weapons into the area. They even thought this will happen through nefarious means. Sarah was one of these people. She accused the military of polluting the area before, and now she fears more deception at the Depot:

After Westinghouse pulls out, I want to see what's going on and have it monitored. I would like the *Anniston Star*, if they're still here, you know they are struggling too, I would like to see someone—outside the Depot—be able to monitor what goes on there, or have somebody inside that would be willing to tell because they say now, and [Name Removed] would know too, whether they could get something in right now because it's so strict. The Westinghouse people have it so strict. But after they've gone, who's going to...they could do anything. There's no telling what, I mean, a Coca Cola truck could come in there—that says Coca Cola that's got chemicals and shit in it. You know? That they would put in there, but it will be okay to know that they were going to do it, but if they aren't going to do it *right*, but if they are going to do it on the sly, and cut corners and save money. Think what could happen. That's frightening to me to think that. I don't trust our government at all. I would trust a big corporation before our government. Of course I'm sure Westinghouse is right in their pockets, but still, they have so much liability, they've got to be careful. That's what I would really like to know, what's going to happen afterwards, after they leave, you know. But they could tell me nothing, and I probably wouldn't believe them. There's so much that went on at the Fort that nobody knew about, you know how they toss chemicals and nerve agents into the water, and did all kinds of stuff and didn't care, you know? Oh well.

Will foreshadowed a similar situation at the Depot. I asked him about some of the alternative technologies supported by opponents to incineration in Anniston. He quickly discounted the seriousness of that option:

No. It was cheaper to build the incinerator, and once, I think, the military understood, that once they incinerated the stockpile here, they would have an incinerator where they could haul other nerve agents too, and burn those nerve agents. The whole chemical neutralization thing was more expensive, and they would have to pick up and move to neutralize the next stockpile of agents.

I asked Wendall if he thought the government was telling the truth. He answered, “I don’t know. They get fined by the ABEM periodically for violations, but they claim they are minor and all that, but who knows, when they monitor themselves, it is sort of hard to know.”

I then asked, “Is it fair to say that there isn’t a lot of civilian oversight or transparency?”

He replied with a smile, “No. It’s the military, the government, and I don’t think they are funded well enough to do that, and I’m not sure they would report some of those fully anyway [laughing]...they’ve done a very good job hopefully, if they tell the truth.” Roberta linked this kind of deception to the substantial pollution and damage left by Monsanto, but she also saw a similarity in motive:

My take on Monsanto is that they knew that PCB’s were a hazard. However, they were cheap, they were durable, and so what if you lose a few eagles and fish? The corporate side of that was well, we are going to keep doing this until we can’t do it anymore, and then everybody started getting sick, and all that stuff happened—the lawsuit, and Monsanto had to pay and clean it out, but they knew well before any of that the hazard that all of this, the PCB’s presented, and I think that perhaps somewhere in some vault somewhere, there is a little piece of paper that says: oh yeah, if we burn these chemical weapons, there’s a point 0002 percent chance that 90 percent of people are going to develop thyroid cancer, and to the government and the powers that be, that’s just a small chance we won’t let anybody know.

I then asked her, “Are there any studies in place for the long-term effects? You just said that there wasn’t any?”

Revealing her rationale, she said, “There are none that I know of.”

Some participants contextualized the incinerator with other criticisms of politics and overall spending priorities. The project in Anniston was very expensive, and some people questioned the actual motivations for the construction of the incinerator. I asked Harold why the Department of Defense chose incineration as the primary disposal tactic. He answered:

Without giving weight to one or the other, there are two big reasons, and not to say my first reason is more important than the second reason, but I'll say one at a time, and I don't mean to weigh one more than the other. First, there is probably a historical, proven method, safe or at least safest method of chemical weapon destruction, and the second is money. This is a very expensive project that brought over a billion dollars into the community.

Although Martha supported the incinerator, she aimed her criticisms at Calhoun County and its grab for federal dollars:

The county got so much money to do emergency whatever [sic] they needed, and of course they wanted to go all out and get some excessive stuff done like have those electronic signs that are over the highways that give you traffic information: but they were going to be specifically for emergency exit information...it was going to be way overkill. The county just wanted to milk it for what they wanted.

Sarah wondered why we spend so much money on defense:

What I can't understand is that with all the stuff they were storing out here, and then they had the treaty to get rid of all of them. Now they are making more and spending more money on *more* and then what are we going to do with that? We're just going to destroy them? It's just ridiculous the money we spend on shit like this. People not even having health insurance and hungry and all, and we're doing this superpower...imperialism, we are doing that! [giggling]

As I interviewed Harriet in her place of work, she pointed to her phone with some disdain:

Our phones are down. So why am I not trusting the Depot? There you go. We can't even keep our phones working at [her place of work]. On these things, I'm conservative.

Talking with Hank, he revealed to me that he was willing to give government officials some credit, but he tempered this optimism with experience:

I think people, because people in the community raised a little bit of a ruckus about it, I don't think there was a lot of information we were privy to, more than we needed or wanted to in some respects. You know, how well does anybody disclose information on stuff like that? It's hard to tell, but my sense is that we knew pretty well what was up. Unless something happens, and we find out that we were told the wrong thing...which has been known to happen.

UNSAFE SYSTEMS

“everybody says: [in a dumpy voice] oh yeah, clean scrubbers and they’re doing all this; nobody...it’s like Monsanto all over again. They’ll do it as long as they can get away with it.”

A few people communicated their concerns about the stockpile, incinerator, and the redundancies for safety. Now, a general sense of unease was shared throughout the community, but a few participants were particularly outspoken on these aspects of the Depot. This kind of critical sentiment was rather rare, and this rarity was not something I expected going into this project. I fully expected more people to criticize the stockpile and incinerator. Asked about the stockpile, Roberta told me:

I think it’s dangerous. I don’t like the image it gives the city: that this is just the place where America and all these warmongers dump all their toys. I don’t like what it does to the environment.

This critical view stems from her skepticism:

There are some uncertainties; I think it does do...it gets rid of the chemical weapons, which is what it’s supposed to do, which is a good thing. Um, but you know, what the long-term effect is going to be, if there will be a long-term effect, I’m just skeptical.

And she placed this skepticism against the generalizations of others and their knee-jerk response to such critical thinking:

Everybody says: [in a dumpy voice] oh yeah, clean scrubbers and they’re doing all this; nobody...it’s like Monsanto all over again. They’ll do it as long as they can get away with it. I’m just a conspiracy theorist...

Interestingly, Roberta was the only respondent to question the widely accepted redundancies in the system. I asked her about this specifically, and she told me:

Human error, somebody comes into work stoned or just got in a fight with their husband or wife, and they're not watching what they are doing, but then again, you have all the safety things in place out there, where if Billy Bob forgets to unplug the red wire, nothing else happens, and the whole system shuts down.

I asked, "You feel pretty confident in those redundancies that people talk about: like you said, those safety steps?"

Pausing for a moment, Roberta responded, "Uh, I feel fairly confident they will keep the thing from exploding, but when you put human error, you've just eliminated all your redundancies."

Harriet questioned the whole premise of the incinerator itself. I asked her if she supported the incinerator, and she quickly told me:

No! No. To me, an incinerator shouldn't be mixed with people. You know, I've been across the country enough times to know there are some really deserted areas. If we absolutely have to have some place to incinerate, why aren't we doing it where it's not by people?

Much of Harriet's criticism comes from understanding how these organizations are policed—or the lack thereof. As she put it:

My understanding is that the incinerator people themselves are responsible for reporting the excursions; I liken that to a driver reporting themselves for speeding cause they get fines for it. I don't think they are very likely to do that.

Much like Roberta, Harriet engaged in the language of conspiracies. I noted this, not because they were engaging in conspiratorial thought, but because both qualified their criticisms with this narrative. Another reason contributing to Harriet's suspicious was her inside information:

I hate to think of a conspiracy, but if it's going to *cost* you money in fines, you're going to guard what you say. And I think they are very careful about talking to the newspapers, and the employees are afraid for their jobs because there hardly any jobs out here anyway, and some of those jobs, it seems to me that the more information you get, the higher your pay is: you have more of an incentive to close up. I know that, I'm thinking of one of my students, [his or her dad] had been involved in—[Name Removed] called it an excursion—and [Name

Removed] was afraid for his health, you know. So...yeah. But he apparently felt that his family was far enough away to be protected and that the benefits of the steady pay was worth it. I don't know if his family agreed.

NOT (SAFE) IN MY BACKYARD

“there's some incinerator out there where things were always breaking”

Whereas knowledge of the incinerators at other locations worked to calm many participants, this kind of information discouraged skeptics. This was probably due in part to the source of the information, as knowledge coming from incineration opponents was likely to be particularly negative, and conversely, supporters tended to gloss over the other locations' problems. I asked Will about the alternatives to incineration, and being familiar with the opposition movement, he told me that:

We'd all heard horror stories of the incinerator in Tooele Utah, and the one out on the Pacific on one of those south...Hawaiian Islands; there's some incinerator out there where things were always breaking, and you really couldn't evacuate the island. They were always having problems at Tooele, and nobody really wanted that here.

Others were not convinced by the “safety” of the other locations. Asked about her feelings on the incinerator's safety, Roberta invoked the incinerator at Umatilla:

No. I mean, I don't think they are pumping stuff out that is going to poison us and kill us, but you just don't know. There's an uncertainty. I wouldn't say confidence. There's an uncertainty. Even though there is Umatilla and all these other weapon disposal centers, nobody knows. You aren't looking at it 20 years after the fact and seeing what's occurred within the population and the environment.

Remembering the past, Sarah recalled problems with other high-risk locations, “Well, with 3-mile island, you know what happened with them, god, and Chernobyl, I mean, we don't want to be that way”.

EVACUATION IMPOSSIBLE

“they give you the emergency exit routes and things like that, which was really weird because for a while they were telling me to get on I-20 on the eastern entrance, but that was all blocked off by construction for years.”

The initial plan for disaster mitigation was a general evacuation of the area surrounding the Depot. As incineration progressed, this tactic would eventually become less emphasized but never completely abandoned. The “sheltering in place” method would become the main strategy to mitigate tragedy in the Anniston area. Harold recalled, “evacuation region-wide was abandoned for what they call shelter in place. They would not have massive evacuations.”

Interested, I asked, “Do you know what went into that decision?”

Harold quickly answered, “Logistics: moving that many people in a very short time, it can’t be done. So they would quarantine an effected area, and deal with that area.” He then went on to tell me that this decision was made, “about a third the way through the incineration process...[because] in an immediate disaster, it [evacuation] would be impossible.

I asked Roberta if she knew her evacuation routes. She also told me how the plans changed:

Yeah, just the standard, you know, you’re in the pink zone, and if you hear this siren, well, and they’ve changed it over the years too: at first, you had to evacuate if you were in this zone, head north if you’re in this zone, head south if you’re in the this zone; and then the shelter in place kits came about after they realized that if anybody tried to evacuate [laughing] it would be total gridlock.

I then asked, “How did they come to that conclusion?”

Turning to me confidently, she said:

They did a study; they found that: with the amount of time to build the roads, the panic, we might as well come up with something else. So they said, maybe this isn't going to be so bad after all. If there is a leak, we've got all these protective measures in place, we've got the EMA out there, they can study the plume and tell exactly where it is going to go, so maybe we'd be better off with shelter in place.

I asked all the respondents about the possibilities of an accident at the Depot and the consequent conditions if something were to happen. Many participants told me that there would be utter chaos, and this feeling worked to undermine the confidence for the possibility of successful evacuation. Bob compared it to the recent disaster at a concert, where people were burned alive from the misuse of pyrotechnics and the apparent disregarding of a fire code:

Yes, the White Snake concert. There was a fire started, and people freaked out, and they trampled each other, and they crammed into one door, and got themselves caught, and a similar thing could happen but on a larger scale...people trying to get out of the area.

Asked about the possibility of an evacuation, Greg also predicted pandemonium and disorder. He told me:

Oh I don't think it would be orderly at all. I think at this point, we are so far removed from where it started, I think that most people probably don't know it's there anymore or what's going on there. So I think it would catch people off guard, where when it first started, it seemed to be a topic of conversation. So you would go places, shopping at the mall or whatever, and people would start talking about it. Now it's not. So I think there'd be a lot of hesitancy as to what in the world is going on? And probably a lot of people not knowing what to do, so I would think probably there would be a few different scenarios all happening simultaneously. Some people would go about their lives as if there are no poisons in the air, and there would be people probably getting in their cars racing out of town, and there would be some people hunkered down in their homes or here at work. I know where I'm supposed to go here, and there's no way I'm doing that.

Wendall felt that the evacuation planning was good and well conveyed, but he doubted that people would exit the area in an orderly fashion. In the case of a major disaster, many people would die:

Yeah, it's a pretty good system and they're well trained and well versed. The word would get out. Now if people would leave in an orderly fashion, I doubt it. It would probably be lots of trouble, and there are a lot of people that couldn't leave that would die in that kind of worst case scenario.

Carla predicted a mass panic. Learning something about the local culture, she compared a potential evacuation to the disorganization coming from a semiannual dusting of snow:

I think it would probably be a sheer panic of people trying to migrate to Georgia and get on the interstate as fast as they could... There would definitely be a panic if something like that happened. If we get snow, we run out of bread and milk at the store. God, I don't want to even think about it. It would be mass panic.

Craig also evoked common disaster myths of panic and disorder:

Well, I think that you know, even with as best as they can do to educate people, there would have been a certain amount of chaos. Even if a gas or chemical weapon or whatever didn't reach anyone, I think just the announcement would cause a certain amount of crime or vehicular death.

Several respondents simply did not accept evacuation as a legitimate answer to a disaster in Anniston. Thinking of the serious infrastructural obstacles, Harriet communicated her disbelief:

I don't see how that many... we have that one road. I don't see how that many people can get on that one road, and then you look at some people, you remember when I talked about people with broken down cars, they don't have cars.

Roberta noticed the same difficulties stemming from infrastructure and the rather chaotic outlay of roads leaving the area. Inner Anniston was highly organized—it was the “Model City” after all, but outwardly, this organization was clearly abandoned. Citing this, she told me that an evacuation would be incredibly difficult:

Because you have to deal with infrastructure you have. Most infrastructure has developed not because of plan: this was the road that Farmer John used to take the pigs to market, and it's nice and flat, well let's put some black top on it. Well, there's our road. The city itself was thought out because you have north, south, east, west: the little grid of roads, but when you get away from the city and pull out on a map, you see the roads going off here, there, everywhere.

Rose agreed. She compared it to the chaos of Hurricane Katrina:

Yeah. Not everybody has access to go out and get something. That's the people that understand and talk about Katrina and stuff, not everybody can get out. Not everybody can do that...there would be like...it seems to me there would be giant traffic jams, and you wouldn't know, be able to get anywhere, and you would be, you could make your house more airtight than your car.

As a kind of thoughtful plan to address this serious problem, some evacuation planning called for carpooling to get people out of the area. Rose lamented her high school's plan to evacuate for a disaster:

You know, I remember now when I was in high school, and I think this was after 911, we had a big drill, and everybody had to partner up with somebody that had a car. They had a list with everyone in school with a car, and I had a Ford Probe, and they gave you a partner, like, I had two freshmen that I was in charge of, that could ride with me I guess, and there was a drill where everybody had to go outside and go to the car. If something happened, you could get away for some reason. Which always terrified me more because I have a fear of being stuck on the interstate with like, you know a hundred thousand people in front and in back of you, so for me, if something happened, I would be the one that stayed. I would be the one during hurricane Katrina in the Superdome.

Others saw this kind of evacuation as a problem. A seasoned teacher, Wendall explained his concerns:

If there was an accident, what would I do with the kids in my class? What would I tell them to do? There has never really been a plan that I think that would be very adequate, other than they get in their cars and drive in the opposite direction, which would be a *huge* problem.

Greg also told me about the emergency plans at a local school. He clearly envisioned problems with the concept:

I'm supposed to go to the basement in the library, and if I have a class, that's where I'm supposed to take the class. I think it would be very difficult for me to be able to do that. Not because I wouldn't *want* to, it would be difficult to keep the students in order to do that.

Wendall continued, essentially pointing out how these kinds of plans were never tested. They were simply unrealistic:

I'm not sure how well it [an evacuation] would work. Nobody's had to try thank goodness, but our students, they don't know what to do. And I think most of the faculty don't know what to do. I think there's a warning system that's in place, and it's pretty good; it will let us know, but most people won't know what to do, but the probability of us ever really needing to use that this far away and with the wind blowing the right direction and carrying whatever that would be is super low, but it is still sort of, scary: to tell people to get in their cars and head north, and take one of two routes...It would be pretty tough.

Harold also noted that these evacuation plans were essentially untested. He told me that people will die, and unlike other, perhaps more prepared, communities, the area would not successfully evacuate:

You have to accept that in the event of a disaster from the incinerator where you've got a gas cloud that is moving and settling, you have to accept that the people in the immediate area of that gas cloud will die no matter what you do, or get very sick no matter what you do, and to panic hundreds of thousands of people, and try to move those people in an *untested* evacuation plan, unlike what you have around nuclear facilities with evacuation routes and signage and drills, we never had any of that as a community. And an untested evacuation plan, it would clog the system both physically on the street and mentally in terms of responsibilities; you couldn't do anything. There would be nothing done.

Anna doubted the efficacy of these plans. As she put it, without a reality check, there is no real way of knowing if the evacuation will work. Laughing, she told me:

You know, I'm not sure. I mean, it's kind of like, I think of 911, it was so far fetched, that nobody had any idea of how to respond or prepare for it because it never happened before. So I kind of think it's the same way with an incident that would have occurred out there, there's some things maybe you can do to prepare, but without actually going through an incident, it's hard to say if the measures would actually be adequate.

Wendy also felt that the schools were not prepared. I asked her if she would be okay if something bad were to happen. She told me:

I don't think so. I mean, especially with school. How are you going to get hundreds of kids to their place: it would be chaos. I thought it was unrealistic because it's one thing during drills for students, but if you know something is really happening, it was one teacher for 40 students, there was no way they could control the chaos.

The concern for children was a common fear. I asked Sarah about the prospects of a mass evacuation, and she communicated her concerns about parents trying to rescue their children in the schools:

They would all panic. They've already done everything at the school; they can't come and get their kids. They have places they can lock down; they've got the buildings where they're completely locked down, and nothing can get in. They've done all the buildings like that. Well, can you imagine the people when they want to get their children out? And they'll take guns if they have to, because they want their kids. If they're going to die, they will want to all die together. They've got the system all set up to where they couldn't get them. So that will be horrible. And the roads, they have routes for you to go and take, but they will become so...people will be so afraid there will be mayhem; you will get killed trying to get out it will take you so long. There are not enough ways to go. It's just futile because we're right in the path, you know? It's the worst, I'm telling you, and here we sit. If I had a family, if I had small children, I wouldn't live here. Uh, uh. I don't think I would.

Vera remembered talking to her teachers about the possibilities of an evacuation. It is difficult to say if they were serious, but she remembered them openly telling her that students would be left to their own devices:

I do remember, and this was mainly like in my sophomore, junior, senior year, right after 911, that's what I remember the most: people talking about the incinerator because everybody was scared that somebody was going to try to blow it up, and I remember them saying there was really tight security around the incinerator, and during those drills where we had to buddy up with people in the car, and I remember two female teachers saying they have children that go to the elementary school down the street, and if something happened, they would not take care of us in the high school [giggle]. They were like, I know we're supposed to help you, but if something happened, I'm going down the street to get my children, sorry.

Disturbing as it was, Jared told me about his thoughts on some of the police officers in the area. Although they are entrusted to stay and provide order in case of an emergency, Jared thinks they would panic and leave like everyone else:

Talking to some of my friends that are county cops, if something happens, they would be the ones to usher people out and keep safety, but I guarantee those people would just bolt too. They would run as fast as they could...can't really say you could blame them too much.

Sarah agreed. She did not expect law enforcement to remain in the community if a disaster were to happen. At its core, this may reflect a generational distrust of government, but as she noted, it would be very difficult for officials to stay away from their families:

What I told them [workers giving out radios] is, do you know if you have something out there, there's no way that anybody's going to get out. There's no way...And then I'll have to be at work anyway, and that's another thing they expect. They expected all the police officers...they send them and tell them all this stuff they had to do, they didn't provide them with any kind of equipment, and they expect them to just forget their families and do that? They weren't going to do that. So it would be mayhem, it wouldn't work.

FANTASY OBJECTS

“And then they want you to put plastic and all that, and that's a bunch of shit, you know?”

Of all the safety material and information distributed to the public, the pervasive plastic sheeting and duct tape received most of the respondents' criticism and doubt. In fact, not everyone had a high opinion of these materials supplied to the community, and I found that even people ostensibly supporting incineration openly questioned the value and effectiveness of this material.

I asked Wendall about his knowledge of what he was supposed to do in an emergency. He put down his cup of coffee and cogently explained the basic idea of sheltering in place:

I forget what their terminology was, something in place—where you would put up duct tape and put up plastic, and go to a safe room; it didn't seem like the ideal way, and then wait for instructions before coming outside.

At the core, many people found this tactic to be ineffective and unrealistic. I asked Roberta about this strategy of sheltering in place with tape and plastic; she described the basic plan:

So they came up with plastic sheeting and duct tape, and everybody was supposed to go get their shelter in place kit, and pick out a room in their house, and in that way when the sirens go off, they are supposed to duct tape all this stuff up and hang out in a plastic capsule. [laughing]

Concerned with that option, I then asked, "So how do you feel about that?"

Roberta answered, "It's ridiculous."

I interrupted, thinking her language was rather strong, "It's ridiculous? Why is something like that ridiculous? I understand, but how would you..."

Roberta explained, "The time factor involved...senior citizens, uneducated population, you know, grandpa Jones is not going to get up on a ladder and tape off his ceiling."

Talking with another participant, I found that he lived close to the Depot, and he received a full box of materials, but he never bothered to even open it. Perplexed, I asked Rob why he has not opened this material.

He laughed, answering, "[laughing] It just doesn't seem like whatever was in it, they would hand to everybody, would really work.

I told him, "That's fascinating. You got the box; you didn't open it because you thought it was silly? Is that right?"

Jokingly, Rob looked around and answered:

Well, I mean...yeah, I thought it was real silly, but I didn't want to throw it away because I thought it might be useful, but I didn't see any point of opening up until it started [laughing through the words] raining acid or whatever is supposed to happen.

When asked about these boxes, other participants also told me they were unsure about the whereabouts of these materials. I asked Wendy if her family still had the tape and plastic, and she answered, "I'm sure we do somewhere, but I don't think my parents have thought about it in years. There's no telling if we still have it or not."

I asked another participant about the possibilities of sheltering in place. Greg qualified his disbelief in the materials, as he did not see a major catastrophe as a realistic possibility. This distinction was important because it showed how a person could simultaneously disbelieve in the materials but still feel relatively safe against the possible dangers of storage and incineration. He explained:

Just kind of a huge mushroom cloud over the Depot where every single weapon goes up all at once, which I don't even know if that was even possible. Just really something along those lines, in which case the plastic and all that, the air filter, I think was only good for about 8 or 9 hours, and that didn't seem long enough. I don't know if it would have been or not, it just didn't seem long enough, but it seemed like I would die anyway, and there would be chemicals everywhere, and there would be a lot of residual problems.

Much like myself, Harriet saw the commonsensical value in duct tape, but she ultimately does not have faith in the shelter in place strategy. Of this, she told me, I have no confidence in that: not one little bit." She illustrated this through telling me of her recent dream of a disaster:

I have not gone and picked up one of those kits you can get with the I guess plastic and duct tape to tape your windows. You know, that seems so ineffectual to me; I'm a big fan of duct tape, don't get me wrong, duct tape can fix a lot of things, but I can not imagine thinking that some plastic and some duct tape around the windows is gonna make me safe. Although I did dream the other night we had a release, maybe because we talked, and I was running around my house looking for plastic and duct tape and saying, why didn't I get that stupid kit? Why didn't I get the stupid kit? So I was trying to find garbage bags that may work, and I'm a big fan of duct tape—I had it.

I asked Hank about the materials he received. Living very close to the Depot, he smiled and cracked a joke about these sorts of tactics:

The other joke is that... what [Name Removed] refers to is the kiss your ass goodbye radios. We've got one of those, and then we all joked about the—what was it—shelter in place: give us some plastic and duct tape so we can you know, conceal ourselves in our houses, and I guess we won't smell as bad when they come get our carcasses out of town [laughing]!

One participant referenced these kinds of sardonic remarks. Asked about the emergency management efforts of the County, Martha told me:

I don't think the county did a bad job. Of course everybody was of course critiquing them because people love to critique that kind of thing, but I don't think the county approached it as well as they could have. I'm trying to remember. There were a lot of tongue-in-cheek comments made about the kits. What do they call it? The shelter in place kits, because they were basically plastic and duct tape [laughing].

She goes on to expose acknowledged problems with these kits, although she rationalized it—like many others—with the belief that she can successfully escape a disaster in Anniston:

And a lot of people, found these air-filter things they had...they were like those dehumidifier units, but they were supposed to clean the air, and they had specific instructions: do not use until you need it because they have a limited life on the filter or something, I'm not really sure. Well some people plugged them in anyway, just to test them, and some of them didn't work. So there are some issues there, and lot of people said I'm not going to get one of those kits; I'm going to get in the car and hightail it out of there, you know? So, which was my plan, I was going to duck behind Cheaha Mountain.

Carla also mentioned the possibility of escape in our conversation. Unlike Martha, she predicted chaos in the streets escaping Anniston. I asked her about the kit she received; tilting her head for a second, she remembered:

It was masks; it was basically stuff to put over your skin: protection for that stuff, to seal off air vents, but if that really happened, knock on wood [she literally knocks on the table], I don't think those are going to help that much [short laugh]. I think it would probably be a sheer panic of people trying to migrate to Georgia and get on the interstate as fast as they could.

Escape or not, many simply saw the prospect of duct taping a shelter as unrealistic if not impossible. I asked Rose if she felt confident with the tape and plastic. She remarked:

I do not know. I feel more confident about sheltering in place than I do driving, but I'm a pretty paranoid person, so I don't know. To me, it's like, I feel like it probably wouldn't work either. It would probably still get through.

Hank explained his issues with the tape and plastic method:

I figured if it got to that stage, it's not really worth messing with. I may be silly in that, and I may regret it one day, but I felt duct tape and plastic is not going to go around here [points to the massive Victorian ceilings and windows].

Simon also questioned the efficacy of taping up a room for sheltering in place. Giggling the whole time, he told me:

I mean, if a cloud of VX gas floats over Jacksonville, there's no amount of duct tape and plastic wrap that's going to keep it from killing you. Less people would probably die if everybody stayed still. I don't know.

Even respondents telling me they felt completely safe with chemical incineration display doubt to the efficacy of sheltering in place. Asked if he was confident about the disaster planning and risk management in the community, Craig confessed:

One silly part—or it seemed silly—was they handed you a big roll of duct tape in these boxes, and it was like: in case you need to shelter in place, you need to place this over your windows to make sure the gas doesn't get in, but I was like man, I got to duct tape the house; that's pretty bad...I would say everything but the duct tape was better, but that actually made it a little bit of a minus, because man, am I really going to have to use this? Because I can't cover up every single crack? So it's true, that might have undermined it a little bit.

I asked, "Do you still keep the duct tape around?"

Grinning, Craig told me, "Only for house projects [smiling]."

The prospect of quickly constructing a shelter may sound good in theory, but when you really think about the impoverished communities surrounding the Depot, it becomes quite problematic. Thinking of this, Will pointed out:

Nah, I mean...you look around, you go and look like I said, at the impoverished part of town or any town in the county, and houses are being held together with scrap and tarpaper, and there's holes in them. No, no it's not going to help. It's just...It's not going to help the bulk of people. It's duck and cover, part two. It's a security blanket. It's whistling as you walk past the graveyard. You know it's not going to really help at all.

Other respondents communicated a similar theme: they saw these efforts as largely psychological in nature. They told me that the purpose of sheltering in place was to calm people down—not that it would actually save anybody. I asked Harold about the tape and plastic. In a deadpan manner, he revealed:

I thought it was stupid. It was a band-aid on a bleeding wound. It didn't mean much at all. It was window dressing... Want me to tape myself up in my bedroom as a gas cloud passed over... It was window-dressing; it really didn't mean much. The people were poorly informed in their use and would not probably use them anyway—wouldn't of helped anything. It was a move by politicians both on the city and county level that insisted those things be distributed to the public to show something that there was something being done on their behalf.

Simon also saw these mitigation efforts as ridiculous. Speaking of the idea of sheltering in place, he told me it was laughable:

It's laughable to think that some duct tape and plastic sheeting could protect you from that kind of stuff. It's laughable. It feels like you know, minor effort to make people feel safer.

Others responded to these materials with a sense of humor. This was understandable when you realize the immediacy in a disaster situation. With impending doom, how were people supposed to calmly and effectively seal up their houses? Irene explained:

We got everything. The air, we got tape up your windows; we got I guess, masks. Frankly, we thought it was probably all a joke too [laugh]. If something does happen, like we're going to have time to dig it out of our closet and tape our windows up, and how safe is that going to make it? We really felt more that if it was going to happen, it was going to happen. It might have happened 20 years earlier, so we took the stuff; we went to the demonstrations; we talked about it, and of course, if it happens in seconds, will you have time to do any of that?

Talking about her family's proximity to the Depot complex, Dorothy told me, "they live right outside the back gate to the Depot, and she and I have talked about it and joked, and she got gas masks." This humor may seem strange to an outsider, but living in the area for many years, I commonly heard people joke about the stockpile and incinerator. It diffused the tension.

Other participants refused to prepare for an incident. They had no real emergency preparations, and they were fine with that. Several respondents told me that they never connected their warning radios. Interviewing Rob, I noticed his emergency radio was collecting dust in the corner of the room. I asked him why was it not plugged in and fully operational.

He told me, "I don't have any faith in it. I guess it would work, I don't know. I guess I'm not scared of hurricanes and stuff like that." This response was particularly interesting because he did not overtly associate the radio with a chemical incident. He saw the real purpose of the radio as a weather-warning device, and he was not alone in this manner. Hank jokingly described the device as a:

Kiss your ass goodbye radio, because when it goes off, you know, it's not a good thing! [laugh] But actually it's a weather radio, a weather report thing, and every time there's a hurricane—I mean, a tornado, it goes off.

I asked Roberta about her radio, and she told me the radio was, "more of a comforting thought. Whether it is effective? I don't think so...the only reason I have a radio is because someone brought it to my house."

I asked, “Do you have it plugged in? You don’t have to tell me if you could get in trouble.”

Citing the weather, she answered, “Yes, it’s plugged in, but the only reason it’s plugged in is for the tornado warning aspect”.

Anna never bothered to put her radio out. Joking about it, she told me, “Well, we got those warning radios, which I just put in the closet. It didn’t match my décor! [laughing] I didn’t want it out.”

Sarah outright refused to accept her warning radio. She explained:

They [Calhoun County] force you to do all this stuff. You are supposed to have a *telephone* [warning radio] in every house, and I don’t want a telephone. I don’t care. I had to sign a piece of paper; they came to my house, and said if I wasn’t going to take one, I’d have to sign something. So I’ll sign it then. I don’t want a damned phone like that in my house, you know?

Jared did not value the radios because of the potential for tragedy and irreparable damage. He imagined there was little to do if an accident really did happen. As he put it:

I never saw anything on the radio. I never saw commercials. I remember being home and mom having the packet they gave her: I believe it was a booklet and a radio, which she never even hooked up because let’s face it; you’re dead if something happens.

One significant factor influencing the perception of legitimacy with the radios and warning system was the proximity of the household to the stockpile. The people doubting their usefulness tend to discount the chances of people working and living closer to the incinerator and stockpile, and they tend to think there was little to do if something were to really happen. I asked Wendy about the radios and sirens, and she told me, “I think they work pretty well, but I think at certain areas, it’s going to be a moot point [chuckle]. It’s going to go off, and you’re dead a couple seconds later, but overall, they work really well.” Living very close to the incinerator, Vera

communicated her helplessness, “If something got out, I mean, it’s like, what the hell could you do?”

In a similar fashion, Simon joked, “on the other end, if something happens and it gets over here, I will never know it! [laughing] You know what I mean?” I asked Bob about the prospects of those near the Depot, and he sadly admitted:

[sigh] I think they [people close to the incinerator/stockpile] might be S.O.L. [shit out of luck], and they might be affected by it: like the people who work there, who don’t work on the incinerator, that work for others, like General Dynamics or the heavy mobile equipment repair facility or any of the other ones.

Harold explained this sentiment very matter-of-factly:

You have to accept that in the event of a disaster from the incinerator where you’ve got a gas cloud that is moving and settling, you have to accept that the people in the immediate area of that gas cloud will die no matter what you do, or get very sick no matter what you do...the employees at the Anniston Army Depot, which are next door to the incinerator, they don’t have gas masks, and [short laugh] I don’t think they have a safe place to hide: shelter in place is what I think that’s called, but they are pretty vulnerable, I feel, all those people close by, especially those people that work next door at the Depot.

Talking about her family member that lives very close to the Depot, Dorothy told me that there was little hope if something bad were to happen. She told me this with a healthy dose of dark humor:

But living that close, I don’t think she’s going to need anything. If anything happens, I don’t think they are going to know it, they’ll be gone so quick, both will disintegrate or whatever, you know? Living that close... You can actually see the gate entrance from her front yard. So it’s pretty much a sitting duck!
[laugh]

Cracking a similar joke, Craig lampooned the television commercials for emergency preparedness:

If you lived on, or right near the Depot, then there wasn’t much you were going to be able to do unless you had precognition and not be there when it happened. That was at least the impression I got from his [an emergency management

official] work on the thing. I don't remember that being in the TV spot though—they didn't go into detail on if you live too close, don't even bother picking up a kit because that never came up [smiling].

Will linked immediate death with long-term environmental problems that would haunt the area—that is, if they were not already resulting from the incineration of these hazardous chemicals:

Probably the death of workers there...contamination of the community. If there were an accident, it would be localized of course. Basically the workers would die—the people in the immediate area, and then of course you would have people injured, and the surrounding community would have to be evacuated, and somebody would have to go in there and clean it up. I really don't really feel that there is an immediate threat, of course some of this crap could get picked up by the wind...carried out. Like I said, the place is already toxic, and we're dumping more pollutants into the environment. Trash is unsightly, but you don't burn it, you know. You don't burn plastic, you shouldn't do that, and that's the analogy I would draw here. We're burning all of our trash, and surely to god, something is getting out. Something's getting out in the smoke; something's getting out in the ash. This stuff isn't, well, it's some of the deadliest stuff on earth. I don't think it's going to break down into harmless ash and water. Surely to god something awful is left over.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In the previous chapter, it was shown that the organizational production of symbolic safety worked to some extent, but in this chapter, we observed that public perception of and response to official definitions were mixed. Many respondents, as described in this chapter, were not appeased at all by official attempts to make them feel safe. They were skeptical of the information they received, they doubted the community's readiness for an actual disaster, and they were not at all convinced that incineration was a safe endeavor. These people did not believe in the symbolic safety sold to them.

In this case, we can see how audiences determine the viability of fantasy documents. Skeptical participants detected and subsequently rejected the assumptions of these documents. Skeptics do not accept the "most benign assumptions about the environment (Clarke and Perrow 1996:1053)". They rejected that "everything will work out right the first time, that every

contingency is known and prepared for (Clarke and Perrow 1996:1041)". In short, these respondents essentially saw the fantasy documents as fictitious and as an attempt to placate the public. Ironically, this came about not through deliberated rationality; it arrived through their ability to seriously imagine and entertain the dangerous potential of the Anniston stockpile and incinerator.

The same can be said for fantasy objects. Distrusting the military and government, skeptics did not share official definitions of risk, and they did not assume that fantasy objects would work in a disaster scenario. They doubted the efficacy of the sheltering materials, and they rejected the generous assumptions made by emergency officials about the environment, their knowledge, and their capabilities.

Thus, when thinking about public response to the organizational production of symbolic safety, disaster researchers should recognize the diversity of our communities and the myriad ways people process information, perceive risk, and attempt to protect themselves. Audiences are important. They do not passively receive information and materials. They make evaluations and judgments to what is and is not realistic.

Based on the interviews with participants in this study, the next chapter explores some of the factors shaping people's perception of risk and their response to the organizational production of symbolic safety.

CHAPTER VIII

SYMBOLIC SAFETY AND INDIVIDUAL RISK PERCEPTION: FACTORS INFLUENCING BELIEF AND SKEPTICISM

As shown in the previous two chapters, participants in the study differed in their response to organizational attempts to produce and communicate symbolic safety. Some bought into the idea and believed they were safe, while others rejected the efforts and felt skeptical about the safety of the stockpile and incineration. These differences resulted from differences in perception that directly related to how people defined the situation, and how they defined the situation played heavily into how they coped with the possible dangers of living so near both the stockpile and incinerator.

A few contextual factors influenced participants' attitudes towards the organizations advocating incineration, and in turn, these important conditions superseded any questions concerning the utility or reality of symbolic safety. These factors contributed to whether participants deemed the organizations as legitimate. This legitimization factor transcended the reality or practicality of emergency planning; this contextualizing effect helps explain how some

respondents could simultaneously disbelieve in symbolic safety and still support incineration efforts. In turn, this will also reconcile how staunch critics remained largely acquiescent against what they see as a serious existential risk.

This chapter will demonstrate what factors influenced respondents' views towards symbolic safety efforts in the area. The first important factor influencing how the respondents defined the situation was simple economics. As previously stated, the Depot was the largest employer in Calhoun County, and the incinerator brought in many jobs to the impoverished area. Many people still remember the closing of Fort McClellan and the devastating effects of its decommission. This basic economic need overruled the unknown risks of the incinerator. In some regards, these economic fears overpowered questions concerning the reality or practicality of symbolic safety.

The second important factor influencing participants was the widespread patriotism in the area. Because the old Fort McClellan was always accessible to the public, a clear division between the civilian and military populations never really existed in Anniston. The large number of military retirees remaining in Calhoun County further compounded this blurring, and both of these factors contributed to the strong, persistent military identity of the Anniston area. This tradition of patriotism contributed in many ways to perceptions concerning the legitimacy of organizations connected to the stockpile and incinerator, and this legitimacy engendered trust, or at least some allowance for ambiguity and ambivalence, towards symbolic safety efforts.

The third influencing factor was the untested perception that one can escape a disaster. This assumption effectively reduced perceptions and consequences of risk, and it contributed to several respondents reconciling their disbelief in symbolic safety and rationalizing not preparing for an emergency.

Last, those critical respondents that rejected symbolic safety and defined incineration proponents as illegitimate must resolve their cognitive dissonance in some manner. This chapter will illustrate how this dissonance manifested as ignorance and general apathy. Further, these skeptics also surrendered to a sense of powerlessness and fatalism against incineration proponents, and this also illustrates the insidiousness of symbolic safety. Even when rejected, these efforts can still communicate and reinforce the social order.

Each of these factors worked in a synergistic fashion to disarm criticisms of emergency planning, and through these varied rationalizations, many people tolerated—and even thrived in—a high-risk environment. Overall, these seemingly small rationalizations combined to create a strong foundation for acceptance of incineration. This helps explain why incineration became a reality in Anniston.

APATHY AND INDIFFERENCE

“It doesn’t affect my day-to-day life”.

Indifference and apathy played a large role in how people make sense of the stockpile and incinerator in Anniston. Although the local opposition movement made some progress initially, the movement never caught on with the public, and to a large degree, some of this can be explained through the general lack of coordinated attention or concern. Put simply, a lot of people just did not care about the stockpile or incinerator, and this was for understandable reasons; many people were busy living their lives, and they cannot concern themselves with these kinds of issues. Like people living on fault lines or next to nuclear power plants, they were more concerned with life’s more pressing issues. The other obligations of life took primacy. Not concerned with the incinerator, Bob explained a common sentiment, “It [the incinerator] doesn’t affect my day-to-day life”.

I asked Wendall about the reaction of the community to the incinerator. Living and working in the area for over forty years, he described his experiences with the community:

Pretty much, the community was oblivious [laugh], even with all the stuff in the paper...Apathy [laughs]. Apathy and ignorance...that sounds so arrogant, but I really think that's true. I don't think they are informed, or up to date, or involved in the risk.

I asked Harold about opposition to the incinerator. He told me, "There were pockets of resistance. There was a greater population of indifference...I didn't talk about it [the incinerator] with anybody. It wasn't a concern."

Nodding my head, I asked him, "It doesn't come up?"

Harold answered, "No, we didn't wear outfits that showed us in skeletons marching against nuclear weapons. It wasn't that. Nobody cared. My circle of friends didn't care."

Intrigued, I then asked, "Why is that?"

Harold solemnly explained:

It's hard to grasp the actual danger, and once through my work, I was involved in the distribution of protective gear, so I was aware of all that. There was a spike in interest, but it was like the needle registering an earthquake. It was a moment. It didn't last very long. They started up the incinerator. Nothing happened...Move on.

The danger was difficult to understand, and the apathy of the community should not be linked to a lack of information on the situation. Aware of the stockpile and incinerator, Rose conveyed the indifference in the community:

Yeah, I still hear things today like every once in a while on the radio—mostly on the radio, you'll hear a public advertisement for the chemical stockpile aware...something, and they say, gosh, I don't remember, I don't remember how the commercial went, but you can get information on what do to in the event of a chemical emergency. It feels like a non-issue to everybody I guess.

I asked Curtis about his preparedness for a disaster, and he told me how it was not a priority for his family. Thinking this over for a second, he communicated how this apathy affects other areas as well:

No. I mean that's the kind of the forward-thinking thing that's more rare. You know, on the TV on the family sitcoms and stuff, I think it happens more than it does in practice. I don't even think we have a fire safety plan. We have some fire extinguishers under the counter like you're supposed to have, but I guess when my kids get old enough to really understand the process, we'll do a fire drill just in case, but if we don't have a fire safety plan, we're not going to have a if the incinerator goes up, shelter in place plan.

Simon told me that he viewed the incinerator primarily as a military issue: something to be left to experts. I asked him how the community reacted to the construction and implementation of the incinerator. He answered:

Um, pretty stoically, I guess. You know? Kind of the same. If it's a military issue, I kind of listen to whatever my dad has to say about it. He never really talked about it much. Yeah. It's kind of one of those things: if I'm really worried about it, I guess I would move. You know what I mean?

Respective of the dangerous work at the Depot, this kind of view made sense. Some participants felt that worrying about the stockpile and incineration did not help the situation. This became compounded with the feelings of patriotism. Sarah explained why people were so apathetic towards the incinerator:

I think a lot of people, if they think they don't think they don't have power to do anything about it, [unintelligible] they don't want to cause trouble. They melt in, and a lot of people think it's un-American; we're not going to do anything against Uncle Sam or whatever, these conservatives.

Others agreed. Roberta linked the apathy concerning the incinerator to the general political attitudes of the local population:

I think several of them were pro-incineration because it was the quickest, cheapest way of doing it. I think the economics of the area, the attitude—you can't fight the government; they are going to do what they want to do—a lot of

low income, uneducated people that just didn't make politics part of their lives, so they didn't even bother to get involved: apathy.

Jared agreed with Roberta's description of the community. He had a rather low opinion of people in the area, specifically their tendency to allow those in power to do what they want:

Most of the people I'm really friends with don't expect anything less than for people to take something like this, if that makes any sense... When I heard they were doing this [building the incinerator], I was like, well that figures. It figures they would do that, and the people would let them because that's their mentality.

And others noticed this utter lack of resistance to the Department of Defense. The community acquiesced. Wendall recalled, "There wasn't much of a reaction from the community at all. It was sort of weird. There were a handful of local people that voiced concerns and some outside people who came in to voice concerns, so there was really very little reaction."

Harriet said of the silence, "Oh yeah, as far as the town goes, you don't see or hear anything about it. Nobody talks about it. It's not on the news."

I asked Wendy about the response in the community, and she told me, "Yeah, evidently it [public opposition] went from one extreme to nothing."

I asked Rose about her memories of the public reaction to the incinerator. Stumped, she shrugged, confessing, "Um, I don't know. I don't really... I don't remember anyone really talking about it." Speaking to some of the respondents, one could get the feeling that the incinerator did not even exist. I imagined for many people in the community, it was probably a complete mystery.

A few participants linked the lack of attention in the community to a larger generational tendency for apathy. I asked Simon if the materials he received were useful or meaningful. In a rather overwhelming fashion, he told me:

Yeah, it made sense I guess, but it didn't feel very pressing. It wasn't something I sat down and devoted to memory. I don't know. Maybe it's just my generation's mentality about life. It's kind of, we're like whatever! Right? So, I don't know.

Looking back at the events leading to the incinerator becoming a reality, Curtis recalled his youthful inattention to these matters:

I am not aware of any alternatives. I assume that alternatives were considered, but I didn't keep up with it all that much. I was you know, at the time I was still in school, like in my undergrad, and undergraduates don't pay attention to such things. Yeah, I would pay more attention now, definitely. I said that I wouldn't, but I totally would. I've got kids. It's dangerous, and if it's something dangerous for my kids, I need to know about it... When you're young, you don't worry about stuff like that. Plus I don't remember ever thinking it was all that of a danger for us.

Craig also noticed this inattention, but he limited it to his own experience and not the overall attitude of the community. Speaking for himself, he explained his individualistic take:

I would blame it mostly on youth and inattention to political and those sort of things. If it wasn't in a videogame or something that applied to my school classes, I wasn't likely to notice it. I was pretty obtuse. I think it was mainly me.

Recalling my own youth, I found these statements to really resonate with my own experiences. I remembered living rather obliviously, never really even thinking about the stockpile or incinerator until many years later. It just was not important at that time in my life. Much like Craig, I was preoccupied with my own, narrow interests, and worrying about something like the stockpile was alien to most everyone I knew in the area. Summing this sentiment of indifference, Harold revealed:

It seems like they distributed out calendars in pretty colors that... in a nice way said, don't worry about things. But I don't remember a letter or presentation sent out saying here's what's out there, this is what we are doing, and this is how we are going to do it, and this is why we feel it is safe to do it this way. There wasn't anything like that. If there was, I didn't receive it; I didn't search it out; I didn't care.

VULNERABILITY

“Because we’re dumb; we don’t question authority.”

Several participants gave explanations to why they thought the stockpile existed in Anniston. Although many respondents did not offer a justification, the ones that did were often critical of the Department of Defense. I asked Sarah, “Why do you think they had all these chemicals out here?”

Sarah looked to the window and recalled a rumor I remember from growing up in the area:

Because they could: because people are poor with farms and stuff. They say, and it is true, that in Weaver, in world war one, this was just a place where they buried mustard gas. That’s all. There was this pasture that they’d put mustard gas. They paid people. They didn’t have any money. It was just poor people, ignorant people...because they could.

Harriet shared a similar sentiment. She told me of her perceptions of the community and the difficulties of adjusting to the local culture, and I asked her about her thoughts on why Anniston was chosen to house so many weapons. She related it back to her criticisms of local employment practices:

Because we’re dumb; we don’t question authority. I think some people are employed, and that’s a big push of that place. Going back to that not questioning authority: they must know better, they’re trusting, [sigh] that’s the ticket.

Even though he strongly supported the incinerator, Curtis still maintains a rather critical view on the rationale for storage in Anniston. He linked this to money and power. I asked him if he knew why weapons were stored in Anniston. He paused for a second and flatly answered:

No, but I would assume it’s the same reason they store all the nuclear waste up in Yucca Flats, because nobody of consequence lives up there. So what does it matter? If you don’t have money to convince your representatives otherwise,

they are going to store it where it's cheapest and least vocal and least represented people live. So that's my guess, and then because they stored it here, they started doing the chemical weapons program here at Fort McClellan, which is the only part that's still active, so that's why so I'm assuming that's the order of events and how it happened.

JOBS

"We need jobs, you know."

Although most respondents gave no justification for why the chemical weapons were stored in Anniston, almost every person clearly understood why the incinerator and Depot were so important to this community. Almost any way you look at it, Anniston was economically depressed. There were isolated pockets of wealth, but the overall economy had become rather bleak over the last twenty years. The entire community suffered greatly after the closing of Fort McClellan, and new economic opportunities remain very limited. Regardless of how participants view the act of incineration, they universally valued the profound positive economic influence coming from the Depot. I asked Will about the Depot and its influence on the community. He quickly explained it in economic terms:

It's one of the major employers of people. It's, I don't have the exact number on the people that work there, but it's in the thousands for sure. I know several people who work on the Depot doing various things: some people working as skilled labor, some people working as professionals with specialized degrees in computer science and math, and some people pushing a broom... Oh yeah, it's real positive. A lot of people, the largest employer in Calhoun County is the Depot: largest payroll.

These government jobs maintained a high value in the community. Civil service jobs were especially helpful due to their hiring practices. These kinds of jobs offered important opportunities to people that have few options, as fair employment in Alabama can be tentative at best. Minorities suffered serious discrimination in employment, and as Bob explained, fair hiring practices can provide opportunities and make a big difference:

If I'm not mistaken, the Depot is the largest employer of citizens in Calhoun County. They provide a lot of good opportunities, and as the government goes, their diverse hiring practices, it gives a lot of opportunity that wouldn't be here if it weren't here, and I think raised the economy...the level of the economy.

These federal jobs were good for the entire community. Because Anniston was so depressed economically, a job with benefits was difficult to find.

Carla described the community's cheery view of the Depot, "Usually people describe it as that people make good money if they work out there, but there's never anything negative when you mention the Depot."

Agreeing, Rose explained:

It [the incinerator] is for jobs. Um, I know there are just tons of people that work at the Depot, and it's always like it's a good job no matter what you're doing—even if you're a janitor. If you're working at the Depot, you probably have health insurance. You know what I mean?

Sarah described the Depot as a local tradition: an economic institution in the area where generations benefit from employment. Noting the overwhelming, commonplace support for the incinerator, she told me:

Everybody that graduates from high school, they go out to the Depot. Their daddy works out there or they know someone that gets them jobs, and they can hire husbands and wives, you know, it doesn't matter. It's really the only industry they've got here, so people will *want* to burn all that stuff out there because that will be their livelihood. They won't care; they are thinking about themselves.

I asked Jared about the Depot, and he supported Sarah's assertion. Getting a job at the Depot was like winning the lottery. He explained:

I've driven out around it, but never to it, but from what I hear, it's like everybody's savior around here: you got to get a job at the Depot, like you just struck gold. You're in, and you're a company man: you're set; you're a made man; they won't fire you because you can be a complete idiot and not do anything, because from what I hear, that's most of what the managers want because they're doing the same thing as far as milking the hourly wage.

Struggling with unemployment, Rob related the Depot's economic value to the community:

You can just tell how good...everyone wants to get on out there. Even when I was with the temp agency, the guy in front of me was always asking how you get on at the Depot, and people at the bar would say they had a good job at the Depot. It's like the local factory or the local good job, the stereotypical good hiring; it seemed like them and Honda were the two biggest. If you get on there, you've got a good job. It's like the steel mill or something, I don't know.

I then asked, "Why are those considered good jobs?"

Comparing the federal jobs to the local employment prospects, Rob quickly explained, "The benefits and it's tough to get fired. It's a government job generally, but I think the contractors work out too, and the pay is decent." And the pay is decent. Working at the Depot can supply a comfortable middle class lifestyle.

Asked about this, Anna shared her warm thoughts of the Depot:

He [a family member] worked there for 38 years. So it was a good source of income. I would say that generally. People that are employed at the Depot can provide well for their families, not that their salaries are above average of anybody in the country, but for around here, it's a good, honest living.

Others do not share this sense of the Depot's benevolence. Although he acknowledged the economic benefits, Jared described employment there as exploitation of tax money:

People keep sucking off it [Depot] basically. With the Depot now, Anniston Army Depot people that work there, they brag how they only really work three hours a day and get 60 hours a week, and they don't have to do anything. Things like that... it's just, it's like they think everything is just going to be there, and it'll be okay. They're living off the government basically: this place, the government healthcare.

I asked Greg about incineration and its possible benefits. He told me that most of the supporters see the incinerator as a creator of jobs, and that, "it's always nice to live somewhere where there's employment. It makes a difference for all of us positively." He continued:

It's [the Depot] the creation of jobs. I know when they started the whole incinerator thing, that all of a sudden, there were a lot more jobs, and people seemed to be, at least the ones getting jobs, were feeling pretty good about it. I don't know. It just seems like a place for employment more than anything.

This kind of comment did a lot to explain how incineration proponents were able to defuse the dangers of incineration. To argue against incineration was to argue against thousands of good jobs, and even without the recent economic downturn nationally, that was a hard sell in rural Alabama. This basic economic fundamental explained why people were so supportive of incineration efforts in Anniston. I asked Wendy about the Depot and who opposed it. Without hesitation, she replied, "I know there's a lot of jobs out there. I don't know how many, but I know there's a lot. I know a lot of people didn't want it here, and people wanted it here for jobs." I ask Jared the same question. He put his hands together near his face and said:

It seemed like it was a small majority [minority] outcrying [sic] like it was awful and a really bad idea, and other ones were saying it was jobs and that's good—we need these jobs... There are going to be people here who will fight tooth and nail, but after a while, most common people will say, ah, I think it will be okay. We need jobs, you know.

This economic rationale was to the point where some people completely disassociated the Depot with its military role. Asked about her views on the Depot, Wendy explained, "I really don't see it as a military thing. Well, now after the war, because they rebuild tanks and stuff like that, I don't still don't look it as military...it's just a base where people work is how I look at it." This disassociation explains how some people can define the Depot as an exclusively benevolent force, and this is withstanding the possible dangers of an accident or pollution.

Harriet spoke to this fear, "Yeah, and that employability factor is huge, and I get that, but the mantra that some jobs are better than no job, even if it will kill you? Even if it kills your kids?"

Many respondents commented on this issue of danger. In some ways, there existed ambiguity when it came to danger from the stockpile and incinerator. No one really had definitive knowledge on this issue; any way you look at it, the danger was largely hypothetical, or at the least, contestable. What really was not contestable was the danger of unemployment. Nearly everyone in the community remembered what happened when the Fort closed. Thinking of the possibilities of losing the Depot, Tonya told me:

It is one of the largest employers...companies, not companies, but anyway, the largest that hires people, and a lot of people out there, but if that were ever to close down I mean, Anniston would be absolutely nothing...It would devastate Anniston, that's for sure. We have people transferring in from other depots to Anniston, and they do a lot of good work out there: repairing vehicles and things for the military.

An owner of a local business, Vera also worries about the possibilities of decommission. She explained her worries:

The Depot plays a huge part, you know. I didn't mention that, but I should have because it's military; it is a *huge* part. I think it's the largest employer in our area, and of course has a big part in our servicemen and women overseas, providing them with the tanks and the equipment they need, and if we lose that, I don't know what Anniston will do. I mean, that is...that supports so many families in this town, one way or another, so many people have at least one member of their household that works out there in some form or fashion. I know a lot of people from the Depot that shop with me. So that's going to affect a multitude of people if we lose the Depot.

I asked her, "Do you think that's a realistic fear?"

Vera expressed a common held view:

Oh yes. Every time it's come up on the closure list or whatever, I know people at the chamber of commerce and other community leaders are immediately going to congress and congressmen and getting in there, working hard, and digging deep, fighting to keep it.

Losing the Fort devastated the local economy, and people generally cherish the Depot because of that very reason. Losing the Depot would more or less be a death sentence for the economic

wellbeing of the area. I asked Rob if the community thought the incinerator was dangerous. He illustrated the common fears of unemployment, “Yeah, I’d say so. I think for people to make that distinction, or to understand it is dangerous, but the lack of jobs is more dangerous. That’s the opinion.”

People knew incineration was only temporary. Eventually the weapons will all burn, and the future remains uncertain. Anna told me of her neighbor and the ensuing end of employment in Anniston:

Well my neighbor works there, and I know she has to wear the safe suit [short laugh], and she works a really crazy shift. They work really unusual shifts, but they make good money, but they don’t have a guarantee of a job beyond the end of the disposal period. They know that.

Linda has a close friend that works at the incinerator. Her concerns were that the community will not find another use for the facility. Imagining the end, she told me:

My pretty good friend, I was talking to him the other day, and they just got through, I think they’re 75 % finished, and I was talking to him about it, and he said: yeah, I think I’ve just about burned myself out of a job here...I do wish someone could determine another use for it, but if you don’t, I think there’s a thousand jobs out there, and if they don’t find a use for it, there’s another thousand people on unemployment.

Roberta placed this event in context. Once incineration ceases, she feared there will be a great exodus from the county. A lot of people that work at the incinerator are highly educated and relatively well paid. She told me of her concerns:

Another thing they are looking at is what they calling the great brain drain. There are eleven hundred employees out there that have been trained in specialized positions specifically for that. Once the facility is closed, the work is done; these people aren’t going to stay around here. They are going somewhere else to find a job. Which is pretty much to be expected because it’s not like you can open up your own shop around here to do that, so the county, as well as the other municipalities in the county, are concerned with here you have these highly technical, trained people—eleven hundred of them—and their families, and once the facilities close, these people are going to scatter to the winds and find other

jobs, and what's that going to do to the economy? What's that going to do to the housing market and everything else? So what they want to do is keep those people here. One of the things they are looking at is [laugh] getting a grant, government money, to refurbish that facility into something else so those people can continue to work there but be retrained to work something else.

Martha told me a very similar worry. She hoped to keep some of these incinerator employees in the county, and this makes sense because Alabama was not exactly known for its highly trained and educated workforce. These incinerator people were valuable to the economy, and she wanted to keep them in the community:

Now the big focus is when that closes down, there are almost eleven hundred jobs out there—and a lot of them are very highly skilled jobs, very good paying jobs, and the community does not want to lose those people for several reasons: number one, many of them may not move right away, so unemployment will go up, but the main thing is that if we can keep that workforce here, it gives us a better opportunity to attract a company that pays well because they are looking for skilled workers.

But some people remained pessimistic about the incinerator's future. I asked Anna about the incinerator's future, and she expressed her lack of optimism, "Since my neighbor works there, and she knows in two years her job will end. I think if they were intending to bring in other stuff or refit it, they would have some kind of indication of opportunity for further employment."

Speaking with Vera, she divulged her inside knowledge on the plans for the incinerator. She owns a local business, and the topic of refitting the incinerator occasionally comes up in conversation with her customers. I asked her if she was hopeful for a new use, and she simply told me:

No. The only thing that comes up in conversation is when a customer comes in and says, our time is going quickly, we aren't going to be here for long. She and her husband works out there, and that's what's on some people's minds now. The job's almost finished. The reason they transferred here is almost over with, and they are looking at moving again in the future. That's the only time things come up about it.

PATRIOTISM

“You can’t play the national anthem or put a flag up unless I start crying, it just hits me that way [voice wavering].”

The incinerator became a reality in Anniston for several reasons, but one important factor was the widespread patriotism in the community. Southerners are known for involvement and participation in the military, and they are typically outspoken in their support of national defense and nationalism. However, in an old military town like Anniston, this support runs very, very deep. I asked Wendall about the apparent lack of opposition to the incinerator, and he linked it to the patriotic nature of the people living in the Anniston area and the common fear that negative press could contribute to the Depot’s possible decommission:

They would never say anything because they’d lose their job I bet, and they would not want to be disrespectful of the military because they would be fearful of saying negative things or things like that, well, the Anniston Army Depot would be the next thing to be closed, and then there would be a *big* hole, not just the Fort leaving, but if they shut down the Depot, that threat has been out there for quite a few years, but when W was the president, they thought they would shut down the Depot and send all the work to Texas—the place in Texarkana, the Depot there, so a lot of these people are retired military people, or career politicians, or relatives, or family members, and so...they are very respectful of the government and the military, and don’t want to do anything that would shed a negative light on any of their dealings, so there hasn’t been a lot...they feel it would be unpatriotic, and southerners are very patriotic...typically, and pro-military.

Other respondents linked the patriotism and lack of critique to the war effort. Sarah told me, “Yeah they’ve *made* it so. You know, they made it, to well, if you don’t like the war, then you’re not patriotic. You know what I mean? So they’ve done the same thing with the incinerator. I asked Roberta if this is so. She agreed, explaining that the military role of the Depot is a source a pride in the community; it makes people feel like they are important in national matters of defense:

Oh yeah, in certain circles, yeah...like if you go down to Clay County, yeah, it's sickening, and in certain areas of Piedmont, it's pretty much like that too. Anniston is probably 50/50, and there's a very strong good ole' boy network, and [in a bravado voice] *you gotta support our troops, you know...* As far as the good ole' southern attitude: [said with toughness] everybody's got to support our troops and all that; and with different wars going on and different military actions, it's kind of odd: it brings a sense of community to this area because they are doing something that's nationally supportive...but it's got an important role.

And this sense of community was something people want to maintain, especially since the painful death of the old Fort. Dorothy recalled a familiar story about the old days at the Fort, "Yeah, it used to be with Fort McClellan. It used to be a big part. I remember I used to hear the playing music when they would bring the flag down and up, you know? And we'd go out there on base a lot, and watch fireworks and stuff." Irene told me of the ups and downs of patriotism in the area:

Let's see, I've gone through different periods [laugh]. When I grew up, the military was respected and looked up to, you know, and I would say the military was on that level of doctors and lawyers and people to be respected, and then we went into the military, and during the period my husband was in the military, we were in during Carter's administration, and I think that's when the military hit a big nose-dive, and during the Vietnam War, where you went from being respected to being spit on, and then it came back when Iraq, they're revered again.

There was a strong generational aspect to this kind of nationalism. Again, talking to Irene, I discovered how deep this patriotism runs in a family:

I'm very patriotic. I was before I married my husband. I was before we went into the military. You can't play the national anthem or put a flag up unless I start crying, it just hits me that way [voice wavering]. It makes me proud. My nephew went to Iraq, and I said, look at the tanks and see if you see anything on them. He said why, and I said because there's a good chance that tank came from the Depot, and he said are you kidding me? And I said no. And so once he got home, my youngest son now works at the Depot, so he took my nephew to tour the Depot, and I don't know if it gave him a sense of wellbeing or a sense of home—even away from home—maybe he saw a tank rolling through, he could say, hey, that came from grandmother's house—right outside her house, you know?

FATALISM

“this was going to happen regardless one way or the other, so you just deal with it”

Talking with many respondents, I discovered a lot of them share a common feeling of fatalism in regards to the incinerator. They fundamentally saw the incinerator as predestined. They felt that nothing they could do would affect the outcome of events, and while opposition may be good for communicating grievances, it was basically a worthless pursuit. The incinerator was going to happen, and it did. Period. Will explained:

I think that the military just knew what it could do. It was going to do it, and all they really wanted to do was to calm everyone and reassure everyone in the area: no, everything is safe. Everything is fine. It's all under control; pay no attention to the man behind the curtain sort of thing. And um, I'm sure the military understood that there would be opposition, and they came in with their PR people, and had town hall meetings and all that good business, and didn't really listen, but said we're listening to you, and it ended up here anyway. It was always going to be here. It was foreordained, predestined.

Bob agreed, “I think it was more of a...it was gonna happen, no matter what. I don't think the forces trying to stop it were going to be able to stop it.”

Sarah echoed this sentiment, “Yeah, even though they had the meetings, it was inevitable. The senators and representatives already agreed to do it...so people wouldn't get up in arms.”

Martha told me, “I think most of the community wanted to build it, burn it, get rid of it, be done with it attitude.”

Jared compared it to Cold War thinking, “I think people would kind of group it into the whole nuclear weapon idea: there's nothing you can do about it.”

Craig told me, “it’s disliked but I think a necessary evil.” Talking to Harold, he clearly illustrated this surrender to fatalism:

There’s a perception that you have more voice than you actually have. Ultimately yes. If they want to put more munitions out there, you can go out there with whatever posters saying whatever you want, and that won’t change the fact that if those who wanted it to happen, it will happen. Cause those who wanted those munitions burned in Anniston, at the Depot, it may have taken longer than they had wanted it to take, but they got it done.

Will shared Harold’s pessimism:

We’re just being boned again, yeah. You get used to it after a while. Anal sex reference...every so often they give you a reach around. I don’t know, man, after a while you get used to it, and nothing anyone here does is going to change what happens. Nothing that happens here is going to prevent them from hauling in more material.

Intrigued, I inquired Will to expand on this view. I asked him about the government’s tactics and how they related to the strategies used by the opposition movement. Although tautological, he offered a useful explanation, arguing that the opposition wielded no real power:

It was more focused...well, they used a multi-pronged attack, but in the end, I think the anti-incineration argument failed first of all because it was never going to succeed. The military was never going to allow it to succeed. And second of all, because it was a lot of sound and fury. Any academic, any...to my knowledge, the anti-incinerator movement, the people running this, only hired one batch of consultants to perform a study. I don’t think they were that well funded. I don’t believe that studies that may have been able to sway important politicians, important civic leaders, to throwing their weight behind the anti-incineration movement, I don’t think they were keen on generating that kind of data, that kind of research. It boiled down to a question of: we don’t want it; we live here, you go away and leave us the hell alone! [in a southern accent] And being mostly leftists and academics, we didn’t have assault rifles at this rally. This wasn’t the tea party. Nobody really felt threatened by a lot of: hey you go away talk; you go and leave us alone. There was no convincing, coercing, or intimidating the military away.

Greg also recognized the limited academic nature of the opposition movement. Most of the work to stop the incinerator began and ended at Jacksonville State University—not a bad place to start a movement, but for whatever reason, it never really took off in the community. He explained:

I think in terms of here at the university, there seemed to be a lot of tension—seemed like there were a lot of people against it. I don't think a lot of people in the county were necessarily happy about it, but people weren't going, *oh that's fantastic!* But at the same time, I *think* there was just kind of this acknowledgement that this was going to happen regardless one way or the other, so you just deal with it, and you move on with your life, and I think that was probably more the sentiment.

The incineration narrative was so powerful that many people were not even aware of any alternatives technologies. Again, many respondents did not see any option other than incineration. A staunch supporter of incineration and the military, I asked Irene about alternatives to incineration:

I don't know. I really don't know. I'm sure other alternatives were probably discussed. There was a lot of stuff in the paper, but I think that was determined early on that it [incineration] was the best and maybe only way to get rid of them on site.

Simon remembered the upstart opposition as well, but he also related the issue to the lack of a “real” alternative to incineration. Given the strong voice of the military, many people saw incineration as inevitable. As he put it:

At first I remember this kind of outrage. People don't want that. They're afraid of *toxins in the air*, and what if something breaks loose you know, and we have contamination everywhere. And that's understandable, but at the same time, if it's not here, then where? [short laugh] You got to do it somewhere. If you have to destroy something, these horrible chemicals, you have to do it somewhere.

Curtis told me a similar opinion. He offered a rather pragmatic take on the issue of incineration:

Now, if you ask me if we should be incinerating these things near people, that's different issue, I don't know. They have to get rid of them somehow. Better they had never built them, but once the genie's out of the bottle, what do you do?

And since many people perceived incineration as primarily a military issue, they also were inclined to surrender agency and responsibility to the government to take care of the danger. Perhaps this was a reason so many respondents feel fatalistic towards the incinerator. Roberta explained:

When it comes to something like this, people do not feel—a general statement—many people do not feel like they are responsible for this, that is the government that's doing this; the government is responsible for this; they are supposed to protect me.

Harriet tied this kind of thinking to a larger cultural tendency to blindly accept authority in whatever form it may be. Asked to describe this, she told me:

It's hard to articulate, but it's quite, quite common. Respect authority, I almost call it a working class mantra, to respect authority, law is god, don't question anything, that's just the way it is... One thing it does on the *positive side* [said in a high pitch as if questioning], it is a great example to use in classes, and because it makes the topics I study: [Subject Removed], it makes it so applicable, that students are able to identify and expand on that into other potential areas, and be a little more *suspicious* of the authority figures they've been so conditioned to accept without question.

One participant's sentiment was particularly revealing. I asked Vera about the incinerator, and she basically explained to me that people were free to leave if they do not like the happenings at the Depot. It was a "love it or leave it" kind of message, and this kind of dismissive mentality resonates deeply in my memories of growing up in the area.

I guess the incinerator has come, things are okay, and like I said, time has come along, and time heals all wounds and heals all things. I guess as time has gone on, I guess it's gone to the back of people's minds, and you deal with the politics or whatever is going on at the time. I guess if that bothers people so much, people could leave. Maybe you can't fight the bureaucratic thing going on, and the incinerator's coming, well I'll go somewhere else where I feel more safe, and I think having that option helps people too. People don't have to stay in the place they don't feel safe.

BLISSFUL IGNORANCE

“I think it’s very interesting that I haven’t, like I said, thought about the incinerator in years, haven’t heard about it, so when you brought it up: oh yeah, we have that!”

As mentioned earlier, many of the participants reported being rather ignorant of the goings-on at the Anniston Army Depot. This should come at no surprise because the early years of the stockpile were shrouded in secrecy. The munitions were officially classified for decades. Of course people in the community knew about the weapons for years, but it was not openly disclosed to the public until the United States agreed to destroy its chemical weapons. Looking back, Harold explained:

They probably didn’t put it on billboards or hand out flyers as to what they were doing in the first place. It was just *done*. They put munitions out there; they didn’t tell people it was *sarin gas*.

Wendall moved to the area back in the sixties, and he had no idea there were thousands of chemical weapons bedded in the community. As he recalled:

Nobody knew they were parked here. The reasons are the same reasons: political atmosphere, apathy, a lot of retired military here, the Fort used to be here, the Depot was here, and you have all these retired military people, the pro-government people, the pro-military people, patriotic people, people busy doing their own lives that weren’t—there was no way to even know it was here, and they didn’t tell them until the treaty came about [laughing].

But some things never change. He did not see much progress in the awareness of the community:

Nobody knew about it until just a few years ago. Back before the incinerator thing raised its head. I would say almost everybody didn’t know it was there. And I would say a whole lot of them faintly know it is there now....Out of sight, out of mind.

And others saw the same persistent ignorance, even in themselves. During our interview Harriet suddenly realized the extent of how many weapons were stored at the Depot. She exclaimed:

Oh my gosh. No, and I'm doing the same thing that we're saying we all do: out of sight, out of mind, I don't think about that. So we have enough here to blow us up, and living in [Location Removed] isn't going to help me out! [laughing]

This ignorance effectively contributed to the creation and implementation of the incinerator in Anniston. Craig remembered his early days in college at Jacksonville State University:

When I first came here as freshman, and maybe it was a couple years later, actually—maybe 99 or so, I remember seeing a bumper sticker on the back of a car that had the word incineration—it had the N and the O bolded out and in large, and I had no idea what that was talking about. I was like, incinerating what? Burning trash? I had no idea what they were talking about. It wasn't until years later I heard it was because they were destroying weapons because they were getting rid of old chemical and biologic weapons—I'm not sure entirely what's being destroyed.

For obvious reasons, locals do not advertise of the incinerator's existence. This may not be for disreputable reasons, as the emergency management people certainly blanket the community with information regarding the stockpile and incinerator. But even so, some people still missed the message. Greg found out about the incinerator after he purchased a house in its shadow:

When I was hired, I didn't know anything about the incinerator, and right after I arrived here, all of a sudden they are talking about this, and I have a house in Anniston, and it's like what? Why didn't anyone tell me this? And so I was pretty upset.

Ironically, he then told me how he never wants to hear information coming from the complex—a possible sign to why others never mentioned the incinerator to him in the first place:

[takes a deep breath] Well it's kind of out of sight, out of mind. You only, or at least I only know what's going on over there if I hear something bad, but hopefully it's one of those things where you don't hear anything about it: they're taking care of business.

Harriet found herself in a similar situation. She had no idea of the incinerator's existence until after she moved to Calhoun County. Thinking back to her first impressions of the incinerator, she recalled the shock of first hearing the emergency sirens:

It is so far off the radar. You do not hear anything about it except the first Tuesday of every month, and one of those alarms is a chemical excursion alarm—I believe they call it—it sounds like aliens are coming. They should really tell newcomers that they test the alarms every first Tuesday of the month because my first Tuesday was a scary experience.

She jokes about it now, “And who would think to ask: By the way, do y’all [in a sarcastic tone] have a chemical incinerator in the area? Actually, [Name Removed] told me, after I accepted the position [laughing].” But one can imagine how this could unsettle a person. She told me, “It was a shock to me. It was. I knew the Army had closed the base, yeah, but it wasn’t on my radar. It was shocking. It was shocking as the scorpions I found in my home.”

Rob admitted the basic concept of the incinerator and stockpile seems dangerous, but he put it in perspective with the more immediate and subsequently occupying demands of life. It also comforted him that he knows very little about such a potentially overwhelming source of danger:

It sounds pretty dangerous, but I guess around here you get used to things like that. It’s like one more thing, so I would like to move and get away from it, that and everything else. I guess I don’t know enough about it...so it’s just another dangerous thing in the world that I can’t do anything about, and I don’t know enough about it.

Other participants reported similar feelings of ignorance when it came to the incinerator and happenings at the Anniston Army Depot. Like so many other people, Craig moved into Calhoun County from an outside location, and he had very little awareness of the incinerator or stockpile. I asked Craig about his early impressions of the incinerator. He told me:

I didn’t even think about it. Like I said, when I first came here as a student, I didn’t even know it was a thing, but since there wasn’t a lot of public outrage or a

lot of people going *man*, we got to get out of here otherwise something bad will happen; since I never *heard* any of that, I didn't think of any reason not to say...it didn't reach my ears...none of my family has ever talked about the incinerator, even one sentence.

Some participants were ignorant of other, perhaps more basic, elements of disaster mitigation and preparedness. Asked about his zone of danger, Rob told me, "I don't know if we were zoned or whatever."

Like Rob, Wendy had no idea. She confessed, "I used to know my zone, and now I have no idea...Yeah, I haven't thought about red zone, orange zone, or the numbers. I know it was numbered with different colors, but I haven't kept up with it since high school."

Roberta felt that the Department of Defense was implicated in this widespread ignorance. She worried about future ramifications of incineration, but she felt people will never know if any harm were done to the area. According to Roberta, the proper studies were never done:

When the facility was first put here, we are going to destroy all the weapons; once we are done, we will even destroy the incinerator, and leave it cleaner than when we found it, although nobody did a baseline study on any of the environment or biological aspects before they built the incinerator.

PERSONAL ESCAPE: A PARADOX

"No, it's not something I put a lot of thought into it. If anything were to happen, we would just evacuate."

Even though not all participants found comfort in the efforts to promote emergency preparedness in the area, many respondents shared a common belief that they—as individuals—can successfully escape an incident. And this must be contrasted with the simultaneously held view that many *other* people will die in the event of an accident, or in the least, many others will not be able to successfully evacuate the area. This interesting view may relate to a shared belief

in individualism, but no one provided a reason for why they felt so exceptional, and no one addressed the paradox. It was just accepted that evacuation would never work for the community, but somehow “I” could just drive to safety.

Against all the emergency plans, the idea of someone personally escaping somehow held a lot of unquestioned legitimacy. Asked about the possibility of a disastrous event, Craig revealed, “I think everybody’s...what my first knee-jerk reaction was that if you said there were chemical weapons nearby that were loose, I would want to get in my car and drive.”

Bob answered in a similar fashion, “I would probably head north, considering that I’m north of it, and it’s going to go east, and there really isn’t a westward route from here that is easily obtainable, and the main east route, you would have to go back toward [short giggle] the Depot to get there.”

Greg expressed a similar story, but he took into account what the public would do, “I’ll be honest with you, I would look at where I would be at a given time and think well, what’s my quickest way out of here, you know? Compared to what would the rest of the population be doing, and trying to think ahead just in case.” He then returned to the question, and I can tell he put a lot of thought into this kind of scenario:

Here [Jacksonville] I was far enough away; all I have to do is get on 21 and head north, no big deal. I would have more than enough time. At home, I probably could get in the car and drive... I would get in my car and drive north; go spend the night in Tennessee or maybe Rome, Georgia. Go breathe in some of the paper mill air...I probably could get in the car and drive away faster than it would have been to put all the plastic and tape up. My fear was being in my car and being stuck, because then I don’t know what I would have done. I would have to close the vents, turn off the air conditioning or whatever I guess, I don’t know, roll up all the windows. It would have been a very uncomfortable situation.

Tonya’s son voiced his concerns about the incinerator, and she attempted to calm him with the possibility of her escape to other locations. As she told it:

He was worried that I lived too close or whatever, but I said no, I'm one of the furthest away from it, don't worry about it—keep my car full of gas, and if something happens, I'll go fly over to Atlanta [laughing]...

Her confidence was reassuring, but she then revealed a possibly fatal mistake in her assessment, “so all I had to do is go right around the corner to DeArmanville and hit the interstate, and I would be there, in Atlanta, so... not to Birmingham, that would be the wrong way! [laughing]”

Harriet explained how the prospect of escape overrode the other emergency possibilities:

I get a calendar, and the calendar tells me *my zone*. Maybe I'm in that active part of denial too because I don't even know my zone. I don't even look at that calendar. To me, I hear an alarm, I get on 9, I go north; I'm not looking for no plastic or duct tape [laughing], you know?

And she weighed this against the possibilities of other people evacuating the area. Laughing about the absurdity of the situation, she told me:

I really, really do. You know, in that dream, I would have gotten in that car and gone north. That's my plan; I knew it when I bought that house; it's right on 9...I can go on 9 and go north. I'm good...I'm thinking everyone else is going on 21. So 9 will be a little more deserted. I think that's a good idea, Jeremy [laughing loudly].

Other respondents shared a similar story. The narrative of personal escape had a lot of purchase with the people I interviewed. When asked about the shelter in place kits, Martha told me why a lot of people are not overly concerned with even picking them up. She explained:

A lot of people said I'm not going to get one of those kits; I'm going to get in the car and hightail it out of there, you know? So, which was my plan, I was going to duck behind Cheaha Mountain.

And others had much the same plan. Irene told me about she and her husband:

With my husband and I, it was more of if something happens, if that siren goes off, he gets in one car, and I get in another. He picks up his parents up; I pick mine up, and we meet in Sylacauga.

Linda shared her plan, “Our evacuation route wasn’t too...if something happened, you got on the interstate and headed to Georgia, or get on 431 and head south.”

On some level, these escape narratives worked because they resonate with the individualistic views of the local population. Many people in this area believed in the power and agency of the exceptional individual. Reflecting on my own experiences in Anniston, I shared this narrative, as I never questioned my own ability to escape an event, but paradoxically, I always imagined a far worse scenario for the larger population surrounding the Depot—even when I lived and worked in the stockpile’s shadow.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter illustrated several factors that shaped perceptions of risk in the Anniston area. These underlying factors largely influenced the participants’ evaluations to the credibility of the organizations creating and distributing risk information. This assessment of legitimacy affected their opinions concerning the efficacy of symbolic safety. The respondents defining incineration proponents in positive terms generally did not criticize the fantasy documents and objects distributed throughout the community. On the other hand, participants defining the incinerator proponents in negative terms generally found the fantasy documents and objects to be extremely problematic and unrealistic. As this chapter makes clear, this critical evaluation usually resulted in surrender to fatalism, apathy, or indifference.

These findings suggest what sociologists already know: that context matters. The basic, bleak economic reality of the Anniston area remained a crucial influencing factor in how the participants evaluated symbolic safety. As Marx and Engels (1947) described long ago, social relationships are both historical and primarily material in nature. Historically, the decommissioning of Fort McClellan remained salient in the memories of local people. Many folks remembered the negative impact of the base’s closure, and they feared the same possibility for the Anniston Army Depot. Further, many people saw the incinerator and Depot as an

economic godsend. Not only were these decent jobs, these were good jobs with federal benefits and protections. People defined these organizations as benefactors, and accordingly, they found ways to circumvent whatever cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1962) concerning symbolic safety this positive definition engendered.

A deep patriotic and nationalistic sentiment also emerged from this socio-historical milieu. As in other military communities (Shriver et al. 2000), patriotic identity and economic saliency largely influenced public attitudes and beliefs towards the military and government entities. This patriotic identity in Anniston did not support tolerance for criticism, and to a large degree, it softened skepticism towards symbolic safety. One could argue that these organizational pressures contributed to a “culture of silence” (Beamish 2000) in Anniston, where institutional practices and identity discouraged objections and open displays of nonconformity to the organizational status quo. The fate of Fort McClellan entrenched this effect.

As previously mentioned, skeptical respondents reported feelings of apathy and indifference towards matters concerning symbolic safety efforts. Some simply surrendered to fatalism and forgave any opportunity for resistance or hope. These attitudes reflect the “crisis of culture (Weinstein and Weinstein 1990:79)” Simmel observed in Postmodern society, where the detached individuals withdraw from Modern structures, forms, and interests. In these anomic conditions, people cease caring about the collective good, and they primarily dedicate their efforts pleasing themselves. I observed this in the sense that skeptical people find themselves in a serious existential dilemma. Given they do not believe in symbolic safety, and that they define the stockpile and incinerator as dangerous, these skeptics must still resolve and explain why they remain in the area.

This research suggests that skeptics essentially rationalized their lack of agency. They talked about the incinerator as if it were immune to their influence and opinion. Others became indifferent to its existence, as if ignoring it would make the threat go away. Regardless of the method, these skeptics had to resolve their own fears concerning the stockpile and incinerator.

One popular tactic used to rationalize risk and dismiss potential problems with symbolic safety was the aforementioned sense of exceptional individualism. Entertaining a hypothetical disaster, many participants envisioned a tragic fate for much of the community. However, they simultaneously expected they could somehow personally escape any carnage. This finding suggests the provocative possibility that audiences have the potential to also engage in fantasy production: that they—as a necessity to resolve cognitive dissonance—have the capacity to construct their own fantasy documents and objects. This fascinating possibility warrants future investigation.

In closing, the lack of real opposition to incineration suggests the importance of these contextualizing factors. As Clarke (1999) predicted, successful fantasy documents silence critics. This fact was evident in Anniston. This silencing quality only became stronger with these contextualizing factors.

The next and final chapter summarizes the major findings of this study and discusses its implications for sociology, emergency management, and future research.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

This purpose of this research project was to examine how organizations create and communicate symbolic safety and assess how members of the public perceive and respond to those efforts. Symbolic safety is a social construction. Producing and distributing symbolic safety is a concerted attempt to persuade people to internalize official definitions of risk. People in power promote these definitions to rationalize the risk they produce, and they hope these efforts appease and calm the public. When accepted, symbolic safety communicates and maintains the impression that things are under control. It secures the existing social order in place, and it convinces audiences that oppositional thoughts are unmerited, illegitimate, and ultimately problematic.

This project began by placing incineration within its socio-historical context. Although known as the “Model City”, Anniston has a complex history that includes an undeniable legacy of environmental pollution, remarkable social inequality, and significant technological risk. The town also has close historical ties to the military, and for at least the near future, the local economy maintains deep ties with the military-industrial complex. These contextualizing

conditions work as the foundation for the construction of the incinerator, and they largely influence the perceptions and opinions of people living in the area.

Drawing upon past research, this study merged insights from the vulnerability paradigm of disaster research and the social construction of risk. It started with and significantly expanded the notion of fantasy documents (Clarke 1999) to include a much broader range of fantasy objects. Powerful organizations engage in the production of these objects not for their safety value but instead to communicate social order and effectively reify a fantasy of control and safety. This highly symbolic nature conforms to the non-literal, non-utilitarian production and consumption found in Postmodernity (Baudrillard 1981).

Summary and Discussion of Findings

In the first phase of analysis I documented what risk information and objects were produced and distributed to the communities surrounding the Anniston Army Depot and its incinerator. I included narrative descriptions of this information and objects, and I contextualized the material with autoethnographic insight. This phase outlined how these organizations produced and communicated symbolic safety. In the second phase I chronicled the comments from participants comforted and discomforted by the risk information and materials they received. This portion documented how respondents consumed and reacted to symbolic safety efforts. In the third phase I illustrated some of the important factors that contributed to the perceptions of the research respondents. These factors interplayed in complex ways to affect how respondents negotiated the reality, value, and necessity of symbolic safety.

Wishing to comprehensively address the research questions, I chose to conduct qualitative research methods. I personally traveled to the Anniston area and interviewed twenty-five people living and working near the stockpile and incinerator. The goal of these interviews was to discover what risk information and materials these people received, and perhaps more

importantly, what they thought of these materials and objects. Qualitative methods, in particular autoethnographic accounts and personal interviews, offer a detail and character of phenomenological information that cannot come from any other method. Although limited in its statistical generalizability, it rings true.

Incineration in Anniston became a reality, and this happened for several important reasons. Although the distributed risk materials and information did provide a degree of comfort to certain members of the population, others remained skeptical of these endeavors. Support or opposition to the incinerator did not necessarily connect to perceptions of these risk products. Interestingly, several contextual factors circumvented these emergency management efforts.

The bleak economic reality of Anniston was foremost in the minds of many people in the area. This was partially due to the painful legacy of Fort McClellan's closing. Many people valued the incinerator as a source of good jobs. Widespread unemployment and underemployment was a commonly understood risk in the Anniston area. The possible risk from an accident remained far less certain. This basic, economic reality became compounded, as people framed these jobs within the larger themes of patriotism, nationalism, and even sacrifice. Local people took pride in the Depot and its importance in national defense, and many people defined this kind of dangerous work as a necessary aspect of their duty to the country.

These factors made opposing the incinerator exceedingly difficult. To oppose the incinerator was tantamount to betraying the country. People clearly defined the Depot in unflinching, nationalistic terms, and there was little tolerance for vulgar displays of dissent. Some respondents justified their burden of risk in terms of sacrifice. Military families often suffer difficulties, and some respondents validated their burden in these same terms. Patriotism aside, many people placed opposition against the positive economic contributions of the Depot.

To oppose the incinerator was to oppose jobs, and that remained a hard sell for most people, especially in an area this economically depressed.

Another important factor that makes these risk materials and information moot was this widespread sense of what I call *exceptional individualism*. This refers to the untested, paradoxical belief that the unprepared individual will somehow transcend the bleak fates of other people in a disaster. In this case, many respondents predicted and expected widespread chaos and destruction from a hypothetical incident or accident in Anniston. They held this view simultaneously with the belief that they have the capacity to personally escape this same hypothetical calamity through an undefined degree of composure and exceptional skill. It seemed most people never questioned this problematic view; it was just accepted on its face that they can get on the nearest road and somehow leave the carnage behind. One only has to look at the complications associated with hurricane-induced mass evacuations to understand the problems of this belief, but even much smaller events—such as traffic generated from sporting events—serve as a good reality check to the untested views of exceptional individualism. People plan these annual events months or even years ahead, and communities make a coordinated effort to organize and direct traffic through the employment of extra police officers and the redirection of traffic so that cars may more efficiently flow away from the stadium. But inevitably the town becomes gridlocked, and these plans—even though carefully thought out and properly executed—seem to make things marginally better. And all of this usually happens within a celebratory environment; these evacuations happen without a sense of impending doom or the pressures of dealing with mass casualties, fires, or serious chemical contamination. As previously mentioned, no respondent directly addressed this paradox in the interviews, and no one explained exactly why they felt so exceptional. Perhaps it resonated with the individualistic tendencies of our culture. This issue begs for more research.

For many people, this uncritical and untested view effectively diminished the need to prepare for a disaster. After all, why prepare for a disaster when you can simply get in your car and leave it all behind? Further, this assumptive view reduced critical thinking, and it negated the purported, overt reasons for the public consuming risk information and sheltering products in the first place: that they provide the community safety from a chemical incident. Unfortunately exceptional individualism worked to undermine emergency preparedness efforts, and emergency planners need to address this obstacle to disaster mitigation.

Another reason explaining this circumvention of emergency management efforts can be found in the more covert nature of these highly symbolic risk products distributed to the public. Support or opposition for the incinerator was not contingent on believing the efficacy of these materials. Many people that support the incinerator did not believe in the emergency plans (evacuation or sheltering) or materials (tape, plastic, filters, et cetera). This may seem counterintuitive, but considering the postmodern production and consumption, this makes sense. People do not consume or produce these materials for their utility, and these products are not produced for their overt, physical properties. Instead, these products are highly symbolic in nature; they effectively communicate that a social order exists, and further, the consumption of these products reifies power structures. When successfully communicated, these products produce a simulacrum of safety. As with so many aspects of postmodern reality, “real” safety no longer exists, and consuming these products affords people the opportunity to chase their desires.

Not all supporters of the incinerator entirely believed in the information and materials; to them, this disbelief was not troubling, as the products were irrelevant to the issue. On the other hand, opponents always disbelieved these products; to them, this disbelief effectively manifested as apathy, indifference, and surrender to a fatalistic view of events related to the incinerator. In both cases, the public consumed these products, and what became communicated was not real safety. This was symbolic safety. The semiotic exchange confirmed the existing social order and

further embedded power with legitimacy, hence the public's apathy and lack of concerted opposition to the incinerator.

Conceptual Implications of the Study

This research provides a unique conceptual contribution to the sociological literature addressing risk. Following the suggestions of Tierney (2007) and Quarantelli (1994), it addresses the need for fresh theoretical insight into the sociology of disasters, and it offers a novel look at how people perceive and negotiate risk information and planning.

This project demonstrates two things. First, it confirms that audiences are active participants in the creation and negotiation of social reality. Second, it illustrates how important contextual factors can interplay with the perceptions of risk and efforts to mitigate disasters. These perceptions of risk differ greatly, and these perceptions change over time and space. They are socially constructed, and this construction becomes accepted as reality through a negotiation of discourse and a complex process of symbolic exchange—both manifesting in diffuse and fluid forms. These perceptions are often contentious, and complex organizations like Chemical Stockpile Emergency Management Program and the Department of Defense put a lot of effort into successfully communicating their versions of reality to the public. This study confirms their successes in Anniston.

All complex organizations that engage in risk make contingency plans. We may return to the writings of Clarke (1999) to better understand this whole process and how it relates to these events in Anniston, Alabama. Clarke writes that organizations often cannot account for the substantial risk they produce. They do not acknowledge or even see their own limitations, and they may overestimate their ability to manage risk. Again, this is not for nefarious reasons necessarily, but it is an unfortunate, reoccurring theme with large organizations in contemporary times. To alleviate this, these organizations create plans to reduce risk to the public, and

according to Clarke, some of these plans have little to no actual utility. Clarke calls these plans “fantasy documents”, and as the name indicates, they are fantastic in their promises to the consuming public. Fantasy documents offer the public an illusion of safety and basic competency. The case of the Anniston incinerator provides an illustration of Clarke’s concept. By any reasonable definition, the degrading stockpile in Anniston is an example of a significant risk imposed on a population by an organization. In this case, the risk comes in several forms: possible leaks and contamination of the environment, explosions from stray lightning or periodic tornadoes, or simple human error and mistakes in transporting, handling, or incinerating these volatile munitions.

Several organizations created and produced plans to mitigate the danger with the aging stockpile and subsequent incinerator. These plans included risk information and objects for the public to consume. In terms of information, all the plans revolve around a central reorganization and redefinition of local geographies. CSEPP, local, federal, and state emergency management agencies reorganized the surrounding populations into four core zones, all based on proximity to the stockpile and on estimates of timeframes dealing with the dispersal of contaminants. Initially this planning called for an untested, coordinated evacuation of surrounding communities, but realizing the problems of a mass evacuation, organizers eventually deemphasized—but not completely disregarded—this plan for sheltering in place, a concept still based on the newly constructed zones of risk in the Anniston area. At first glance this abandonment of evacuation plans for sheltering seems odd, but seriously considering Clarke’s definition of fantasy documents, this abandonment becomes sensible. Fantasy documents are neither believed nor not believed by their producers (Clarke and Perrow 1996); perhaps that also applies to their consumers as well. Perhaps organizations do not really care about the viability of their own plans. Rather, they may care more about the successful communication of the fact that a plan exists. In some ways changing the plans further reinforces the logic of the plan in the first place;

like some kind of surreal sequel, it gives these organizations a chance to elaborate and expand on their fantasy. This also slows any chance for negation in the public, as newer plans carry even less expectations for a reality check, and through their very existence, they communicate that officials still maintain control of the situation.

This research builds from this conceptualization of fantasy documents. But I contend these organizations not only produce fantasy documents but also produce objects to amplify the same quiescent effect. This process is evident in the case of the Anniston stockpile and incinerator. Emergency officials produced and distributed fantasy objects to the community surrounding the Depot according to their distance and perceived risk. As previously mentioned, these objects included gasmasks, air filters, scissors, and tape with plastic sheeting, but their use goes beyond their physical capabilities. Although these materials could potentially save lives, there still exist serious doubts considering some of the difficulties with this population properly implementing these objects in a disaster scenario. As the critics I interviewed pointed out, these areas contain people with varying abilities and condition of housing. Additionally there may not be enough warning for those living and working close to the complex. But these confounding variables aside, confidence in these objects demands an assumption that they will work as advertised—as thankfully, they remain untested. But I contend these objects are not produced or consumed for their overt utility. They are highly symbolic, and their desired effect is to calm the population and reintegrate the social order.

These objects worked to preserve this principle of reality. Consuming symbolic safety affirmed, legitimized, and reified power. Symbolic safety crystallized the impression that a disaster was nearly impossible, and that if it were to somehow occur, officials could and would effectively control the disaster situation. The public felt prepared that everything would remain orderly and secure. To this effect, these powerful organizations produced and distributed fantasy documents; they bolstered this with tangible objects to achieve a real sense of credibility. Their

audiences varied in their opinions of these objects, and although more important with critics, their utility did not greatly influence opinions on the risky organizations one-way or the other. Instead, these objects silenced critics and ensured continuity in the social order of the community. This became apparent in the widespread apathy in the community and most evident in the frustrations of the opponents to incineration.

Applied Implications

This research contains several implications for application away from academia. In particular, emergency planners should become mindful of not only their mitigation efforts and what they produce, but they need to account for how the population actually makes sense of the materials and information they receive. Audiences are not passive consumers of information; they have a degree of agency, and they ultimately decide the utility and value of these efforts.

Key to this study's applied implications is the previously described phenomenon of exceptional individualism. This particular cognitive factor imposes substantial obstacles to emergency planning efforts. In the case of Anniston, we can see how this mindset impaired citizens from planning adequately for a disaster. Emergency planners need to somehow communicate the potential problems with this kind of thinking. Individuals need to critically assess their prospects for surviving a real disaster, and they need to recognize and resolve the problematic, existential disconnect they maintain between themselves and the community at large. Communicating this will be difficult, as the narrative of rugged individualism runs deep in the culture. Perhaps emergency managers could instead emphasize community solidarity in their planning; they could call for neighborhoods and smaller communities to plan together for an emergency. This coordination could also engender informal ties and set up organic avenues of communication for many possible disaster scenarios. Individual persons need to see past themselves. They need to become aware of how interdependent the community really is. At any

level, it would be good if the community were more directly involved in disaster planning. I think more information would create a certain amount of concern, and that attention could force individuals to recognize the significance problems with this exceptional view of the individual.

Limitations

This research has some methodological limitations. The primary concern is its limited generalizability. The non-probability sampling method is not amenable to statistical analysis, and because the focus is so specific to the Anniston area, findings from this study may not be generalizable to other places and phenomena. Nevertheless, the case is unique and deserving of this kind of exploratory analysis. Moreover, given that there are other chemical weapons sites in the United States, some of the findings are surely transferable to the other communities. Another limitation of the research involves the issue of timing. By the time this research was conducted, incineration was already underway in Anniston. Perhaps a longitudinal study that tracked citizen perceptions of risk and safety over a longer period of time, including before the incinerator was approved, would have generated other interesting insights.

Future Research

This project has expanded research on risk and disaster, merging the vulnerability and social constructionist paradigms. As a result, it has opened new, potentially fruitful areas of future investigation. For example, although environmental justice was not a primary focus of the current study, future research could address the significant pollution in the Anniston area and its close relationship to historical and contemporary events concerning race and class. There is a strong case for environmental racism in Anniston, and future research should address this important issue.

Additionally, another topic not fully explored in this study that should be pursued further is the issue of environmental illness in the areas surrounding the Anniston Depot. Although it was not included in the analysis, the topic came up unsolicited in the interviews. One participant revealed that every woman on her street but herself has breast cancer.

Finally, future research should explore the possible link between the use of fantasy objects to manufacture “therapeutic communities.” It may be that because of devices such as warning sirens and radio alerts, people have stopped differentiating between technological risks and the hazards imposed by nature. Perhaps these devices help create new communities and geographies of risk, and these effectively promote social solidarity in the face of potential harm.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

1. Tell me about Anniston, Alabama.
 - a. If you had to describe it to an outsider, for example—someone moving here and they want to know what it's like...
 - b. History?
 - c. Important things to know?
 - d. Phenomenological qualities...
 - e. How did you get here?
2. How would you describe the role of the military in the community?
 - a. Depot
 - b. Fort McClellan
3. I've been gone for a while, can you tell me about the incinerator?
 - a. What are your thoughts about the incinerator being built here?
 - b. What do you know about incineration?
 - i. Describe the process of incineration?
4. How would you describe the community reaction to the incinerator being built here in Anniston?
 - a. How has your family and friends reacted?
 - b. Do you know of anyone opposed to incineration?
 - i. Can you tell me about them?
5. What kind of risk information have you received about incineration?
 - a. Do you feel that it is adequate?

- b. Have you taken any special steps or anything ‘just in case’?
- 6. What do you think would happen if there were an accident at the Depot?
 - a. How adequately do you think the community is prepared?
 - b. Do you think government officials have done enough to inform the public on what to do?
- 7. Thank you for your help. Before we go, I need to ask you a few last questions:
 - a. What year were you born?
 - b. What is your ethnicity?
 - c. What’s the highest level of education you’ve obtained?
- 8. Do you have any questions for me?
- 9. Is there anything important you would like to add that we didn’t discuss?
- 10. Do you know anyone that might be interested in participating in this study? Could you give me their information?

APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Monday, June 21, 2010
IRB Application No: AS1045
Proposal Title: The Armitson Incinerator Study

Reviewed and Processed as: Expedited

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 6/20/2011

Principal Investigator(s):

Jeremy Ross 405 S. Murray Stillwater, OK 74078	Gary Webb 471 Murray Stillwater, OK 74078
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The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research, and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 219 Cordell North (phone: 405-744-5700, beth.mcternan@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Shelia Kennison, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Jeremy Allen Ross

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: RISK AND THE PRODUCTION OF SYMBOLIC SAFETY: A STUDY OF WEAPONS INCINERATION IN ANNISTON, ALABAMA

Major Field: Sociology

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy/Education in Sociology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2012.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in Sociology at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee in 2007.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Political Science and Sociology at Jacksonville State University, Jacksonville, Alabama in 2005.

Experience:

Graduate Assistant, Middle Tennessee State University from 2006-2007;
Graduate Assistant, Oklahoma State University from 2007-2012.

Professional Memberships:

American Sociological Association; Mid-South Sociological Association.

Name: Jeremy Allen Ross

Date of Degree: July, 2012

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: RISK AND THE PRODUCTION OF SYMBOLIC SAFETY: A STUDY OF WEAPONS INCENERATION IN ANNISTON, ALABAMA

Pages in Study: 183

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: Sociology

Scope and Method of Study: This study qualitatively examined the perceptions and reactions to risk information and materials concerning a chemical weapons stockpile and incinerator in Anniston, Alabama. This information was gathered through in-depth interviews of local people, and the data were analyzed through a modified grounded theory method. The scope of this study is phenomenological in nature, and it does not generalize to a large population.

Findings and Conclusions: This study concludes that the efforts of organizations connected to the incinerator and stockpile were both successful and unsuccessful in communicating symbolic safety. Moreover, other factors contributed to how respondents made sense of the risk information and materials they consumed. Primarily, economics play a large role in the rationalization of risk; additionally, many participants feel a sense of exceptional individualism—an unrealistic expectation that they may escape danger, unlike other people in the area. Last, risk materials and information are not limited to their overt uses. The act of consuming these things works to confirm and reify the existing social order.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Gary Webb
