

Down the Rabbit Hole

*One reporter's effort to understand
a forty-year-old nuclear accident*

BY BARBARA MORAN

Anouschka and I stood in the parking lot of an empty gas station, leaning against the hood of the rental car. It was hot. In southern Spain, it's always hot. The gas station sat at the base of a curving canyon road; high walls of red rock rose on either side of us, meeting the impossibly blue sky overhead. I listened to Anouschka, my translator, chatter on the cell phone in Spanish. She finished her conversation and snapped the phone shut. "José is coming down

to meet us," she said. "He says we'll recognize him because he looks like an ugly Hugh Laurie."

She paused. "Hugh Laurie is already pretty ugly, no?"

I had come to the Spanish desert in the winter of 2007 to research a book about a cold war nuclear accident. On January 17, 1966, an American B-52 bomber carrying four hydrogen bombs collided with a tanker plane during a mid-air refueling over Spain. Both planes exploded, killing seven airmen and launching the four H-bombs into the sky. Three bombs landed around the small farming village of Palomares. There was no nuclear explosion, but the impact detonated the high explosive in two of the bombs, spreading plutonium for miles. The bombs were quickly recovered, but cleanup of debris and contaminated soil took months. The fourth bomb landed in the Mediterranean, and it took nearly three months—and the largest salvage effort in Navy history—to recover it. The broken arrow at

burial. The United States also helped establish a long-term health monitoring system for the people of Palomares. With these measures completed, most people considered the matter closed.

Unfortunately, the cleanup was incomplete. The most contaminated site, called area #2 because the Americans found the second bomb there, was a steep and rocky stretch on the far outskirts of town. Rather than remove topsoil from area #2, the Air Force—after sometimes tense negotiations with the Spanish government—agreed to turn the dirt with picks and shovels, diluting the plutonium until the radiation count dropped below the level of detection. This left a large swath of Spanish countryside contaminated. *El País*, the largest daily newspaper in Spain, also reported that the Americans had left behind two buried trenches, about ten yards wide and thirty yards long, containing radioactive debris. Area #2 and the mysterious trenches became focal points of my

Palomares is still regarded as the worst known nuclear weapons accident in all history, and the American cleanup remains the subject of considerable controversy in Spain. José Herrera Plaza, an eccentric documentary filmmaker (and Hugh Laurie look-alike) who was coming down the canyon to meet us, was my last chance to find out what exactly had happened in that patch of Spanish desert.

Why was this the case? Why was I, an American journalist, unable to get information about a forty-year-old, publicly acknowledged nuclear accident? The answer is a mixture of politics and bureaucracy, one reporter's quixotic battle against the nearly impenetrable edifice that is the U.S. Department of Energy.

IN 2004, I BEGAN GATHERING INFORMATION for my book about the Palomares accident. One of my goals was to discern the extent of plutonium contamination in Spain and determine if the Spanish or American governments had intentionally concealed its magnitude. I knew this much: after the accident, the United States Air Force made a massive effort to clean up the plutonium, agreeing to remove the most contaminated topsoil and vegetation. For weeks, airmen loaded contaminated dirt and tomato vines into steel drums. In March 1966, they put 4,810 of these barrels onto a Navy ship and sent them to the Savannah River facility, a plutonium plant and nuclear fuel disposal site in South Carolina, for



Collateral damage In 1966, children from Palomares picked tomatoes that were contaminated with radiation.

research. How bad was the contamination? How long had the authorities known about the buried debris? Had there been a cover-up?

Before my trip to Spain, getting information in the U.S. had proven exasperating. I wasn't alone. Many historians, especially those researching nuclear weapons, were frustrated as they tried to access documents during the Bush administration years. An August 2006 article in *The Washington Post*, for example, described how researchers at the National Security Archive, an independent research institute located at George Washington University, were surprised to find cold war statistics on the number of American nuclear weapons blacked out in documents they had obtained. This was curious because the numbers had been published in the past, and more detailed ones had been given to the Soviets during arms control talks. The DOE was known for its openness during the Clinton years, but after 9/11, the Bush administration initiated a massive reclassification campaign,

squirreling away documents that had long been public. My research was caught up in the sweep.

Over the years of researching this book, I filed about thirty Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. As a freelance writer without the backing of a major news organization, I had no clout. But perhaps it wouldn't have mattered if I did. While the law stipulates that organizations must respond to FOIA requests within twenty working days, most of my requests were ignored, delayed, or disappeared. Sandia National Laboratories, a DOE facility that helps manage America's nuclear weapons, proved especially maddening. One FOIA request to Sandia yielded several videotapes—oral histories of scientists and engineers who had investigated Palomares. Two of the videos were so scrambled that they were impossible to watch. When I asked Sandia for clean copies, I was told they couldn't be found. Another FOIA request to Sandia produced a list of unclassified documents relating to the accident. When

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I requested several of these documents, I was told they couldn't be found. When I scheduled a meeting with a Sandia archivist during a research trip to Albuquerque, she didn't show up, leaving me drumming my fingers in an empty conference room. Even people, it seems, go missing in the bowels of Sandia National Labs.

Sandia wasn't the only obfuscator. The long arm of the DOE even reached far into the National Archives. Francis Smith, a gunner on the USS *Albany*, the Navy flagship during the ocean search for the fourth bomb, told me that his ship had switched the warheads on their Talos missiles from conventional to nuclear during the Palomares mission. As a lowly gunner's mate, Smith didn't know why his superiors had decided to change the warheads; but to me, the switch signified a significant uptick in the tension level, an important turning point in the narrative. When I went to the National Archives to confirm his story, I found that the deck logs of the *Albany* had been "pulled" by the DOE. Deck logs are the most benign of military documents, recording a ship's position, the weather, the arrival of important guests, and occasional events. They are rarely classified.

When I asked an archivist why the deck logs had been pulled, he shrugged and said he didn't know. Confused, I asked another archivist, who drew me aside and, in a hushed voice, told me that the DOE had pulled anything that mentioned nuclear weapons. I could get the deck logs, but would have to file a FOIA request. I did, and returned to the National Archives a couple of months later, excited to see the juicy details revealed in the *Albany's* deck logs. Perhaps there had been an incident on the ship, maybe involving the Soviet trawler spying nearby. If the government had gone to the trouble to hide the documents, surely there must be some revelation there. At the archives, I eagerly paged through the logs. For the entire time the *Albany* was cruising off Palomares, I found two entries relating to nuclear weapons, both from March 29, 1966:

8:40 am: Commenced handling Talos missile warheads
10:15 am: Secured from handling Talos missile warheads

Amid such disappointments, there were moments of hope. I received the same airplane accident report from two government sources, each with different sections blacked out.

This allowed me to piece together a fuller account of the crash. At the Washington Navy Yard, I found a box of files and photos about the recovery of the fourth weapon, which various people had claimed were either classified or didn't exist. But despite such finds, by 2007 I was beginning to panic. I still didn't know the levels of plutonium contamination in Spain, the current state of the cleanup, or even the *history* of the cleanup. I couldn't find the scientist in charge. I couldn't find any budget numbers. My attempts at research through normal channels were being blocked or ignored, and I was starting to wonder if I would ever be able to piece together an accurate picture of the botched cleanup and the state of Palomares today. The DOE, and its Spanish counterpart, CIEMAT, were uncooperative. Sections of the DOE Web site relating to Palomares would suddenly disappear after I requested information on them. (Luckily I kept printouts of the Web pages so I could cite the "disappeared" information in my endnotes.) The DOE's Spain Program Manager, Mohandas Bhat, didn't respond to my calls, e-mails, or requests for an interview. Well, that's not exactly true. He replied to one e-mail in late 2006:

Thank you for your interest in the Palomares Program. Please note that the entire Palomares program is conducted by CIEMAT with their scientists working on the projects. Over the years, DOE has been contributing a small portion of the annual costs of the Palomares program. If you wish to obtain further information about the program, please contact CIEMAT directly.

Which I did, of course. And, getting no response, I flew to Madrid, took the Metro to City University station, and trudged nearly a mile to the offices of CIEMAT. In America, whenever a government official stonewalls me, I have a stock response: I go to his or her office and sit outside until someone talks to me. This almost always works. After a couple of hours, the secretary gets agitated and tells someone to get me out of her hair. Sometimes it is a lackey; sometimes it is the actual official. I expected the technique to work in Spain, but I was so wrong. When it comes to ignoring people, Spanish bureaucrats are masters of their art. I sat at CIEMAT for two full days with the secretary offering only the merest acknowledgement of my presence. When I left Madrid for the Spanish desert, I remained empty-handed.

JOSÉ HERRERA PLAZA, A SPANISH WRITER AND FILMMAKER who had been documenting Palomares for years, was my last hope. He pulled up to the gas station where Anouschka and I waited, and unfolded himself from his car. He hadn't been lying about Hugh Laurie. Herrera was tall and lanky, with a bobbing, oversize head and bulging eyes. "I think he has a thyroid condition," whispered Anouschka. We climbed into our car and followed him up the mountain.

At José's house we ate and drank and watched a rough cut of his Palomares documentary. We talked about the town. As José talked, he paced back and forth quickly, his long arms gesticulating. He explained how he had become obsessed with Palomares. He believed that the government wanted

the townspeople exposed to plutonium so that scientists could study the long-term effects of plutonium ingestion. He repeatedly called the retired Spanish scientist who had overseen the government's health-monitoring program—the one man who had spoken to me in Madrid—“Dr. Mengele.”

Herrera's interpretation of events seemed extreme, but after my failure at CIEMAT, I had no additional information and few Spanish contacts. The next day, after a tour of Palomares—an incongruous town somewhere between a peasant village and a middle-class British holiday resort—we returned to José's house. By this point, he trusted me enough to download several hundred DOE documents onto my laptop. He had gotten these files from the DOE Web site, and I was embarrassed that I hadn't been able to find them myself. But when I returned to the U.S. and typed in the links José had shown me, they were all dead. It's unclear whether José had retrieved the documents years ago, before the post-9/11 reclassification effort, or whether the DOE had blocked parts of its Web site within the U.S. only. Regardless, despite many attempts over the next two years, I was never able to access these links from my computer.

But thanks to José, I already had the goods. I painstakingly pored through his documents until I hit paydirt. Buried among the memos and letters spanning forty years were some damning tidbits. One 1998 memo paraphrased DOE and CIEMAT scientists discussing plutonium contamination and the location of “pits.” “Important to recognize that Pu [Plutonium] was left at the site,” Spanish scientist Emilio Iranzo is cited as saying. “There were not enough

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drums to take all the Pu away.” The memo proved that American and Spanish officials had known about the buried debris and excessive plutonium for at least ten years before the information was exposed in the press. I had found my cover-up.

After my visit, someone within CIEMAT began leaking information to a reporter at *El País*. I'm not sure if my investigation prompted this new openness, but new revelations about Palomares began to appear in the paper every few months. The Spanish government is now finalizing the expropriation of twenty-one hectares (about fifty acres) of

contaminated land around area #2, to prevent a British company from developing it into a golf resort. And, to compensate the people of Palomares for their suffering, the government has tentative plans to build a theme park in the area. One section of the theme park will showcase the era of nuclear technology, and feature the shell of an American B-52.

MY BOOK, *THE DAY WE LOST THE H-BOMB: COLD WAR, HOT Nukes, and the Worst Nuclear Weapons Disaster in History*, was published last year.

Of the FOIA requests I filed over the course of my research, about half were ultimately filled after long delays; the rest were, as far as I can tell, simply ignored. Without money to hire a lawyer, I had no recourse when government officials chose to sidestep the law. For one important request I got Senator John Kerry's office involved, but despite the efforts of his staff, that request was filled only in November 2009, more than five years after I filed the original request and seven months after my book was published. To be fair, without FOIA I may have never received any of these documents. But for me, it worked only when I was lucky and persistent—and had lots and lots of time.

However, I also learned that there is often a back door to access this kind of information. The U.S. government is a vast, somewhat sloppy organization. Some documents I couldn't get through FOIA I found in boxes and basements. Many people I interviewed gave me papers and photographs that I couldn't get from the U.S. government. Two retired Navy divers, for instance, loaned me publicity photos taken during the recovery that had since disappeared. A retired Sandia engineer with an ax to grind gave me a CD full of maps and memos. Once, a friendly FOIA manager pasted a personal note onto a formal letter, advising me to look for a particular document outside official channels. (Unfortunately, her advice led me to the Sandia archives and a dead end.) And, of course, my documentary filmmaker in Spain gave me a treasure trove of DOE files.

Because I finished the bulk of my research while George W. Bush was still in office, I don't know if the situation has changed under Barack Obama. However, weeks after Obama's inauguration, I began getting calls from newly placed FOIA administrators who apologized for the delays and promised to fast-track some of my requests. In a few cases, this actually happened. Others sank quickly back into the FOIA darkness.

I finished this project with a mixed sense of hope and hopelessness. My original goal was to unearth every important document about this nuclear accident, to tell the definitive history of the event. I may have succeeded, but I doubt it. In coming years, I am sure that more documents will emerge to further illuminate the story. That, I have come to accept, is the nature of history. **CJR**

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