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'The Rachel Maddow Show' for Wednesday, March 16th, 2011

Read the transcript to the Wednesday show

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Guests: Edwin Lyman, Laurie Garrett

RACHEL MADDOW, HOST: Good evening, Lawrence. Thank you for that.

And thanks to you at home for staying with us this hour.

Here's what happened at Three Mile Island:

One of the reactors at Three Mile Island about half melted down. Because of human error and technical failures and some bad design, the cooling system at Three Mile Island failed and the water levels inside that reactor fell. That meant that the super hot and radioactive fuel rods inside the reactor were no longer being cooled by water covering them up. And so, they started to melt.

The fuel rods are long, skinny metal tubes with pellets of uranium inside them. And they are hot. They are thermally hot like "touch the stove" hot. And they are also radioactively hot, too.

Once those things at Three Mile Island were not being cooled by water anymore, once they heated to a couple thousand degrees Fahrenheit, the metal tubes holding the uranium pellets started to breakdown. When the temperature got even hotter, the uranium

fuel itself started to meltdown, too. And melting fuel rods like that can release a ton of radioactivity.

They are radioactive, that is on purpose. That's how they make nuclear power. But when they breakdown, they release that radioactivity into the atmosphere. They release radioactive stuff and they also hydrogen gas. Now, hydrogen is not radioactive, but it can be explosive.

So, that's your bad combination, right? You're releasing radioactive stuff and something that explodes. And those two things are being emitted at the same time together.

At Three Mile Island, faced with that problem, authorities did release into the air some of that

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radioactivity that was being emitted from those damaged fuel rods. They did that in order to relieve pressure so the reactor wouldn't explode. They also at one point had a huge hydrogen bubble they were worried could blow up. The risk of an explosion, of course, is that all the radioactivity being emitted by those messed up, hot, damaged fuel rods would just get emitted directly into those skies over Middletown, Pennsylvania.

They were worried that it was going to blow up, but the hydrogen bubble did not blow up. It did not cause an explosion. And the containment vessel around the plant held, and the only big release of radiation in the Three Mile Island accident was what they released on purpose when they felt they had to do it to relieve pressure to prevent an explosion.

So, that's what happened at Three Mile Island. No deaths and no injuries to anyone who worked at the plant. There was some exposure to radioactivity by people who lived in the vicinity of the plant. Authorities generally have not attributed any major health consequences to that exposure. But for many years, many local residents have beg to differ.

That's the Three Mile Island situation. That's the worst accident we've ever had at a commercial nuclear reactor in the United States. That happened in 1979.

It was not until 1990 that they finished getting all the radioactive fuel out of Three Mile Island. It took 11 years. The rubble from the Three Mile Island meltdown is sitting in radiation

containment cask at Idaho National Laboratory in Idaho right now.

That's Three Mile Island.

Now, Chernobyl. At Chernobyl, there was no containment building at all around the reactor that blew up. What seems to have been a poorly designed experiment or test resulted in a big surge of power and the reactor exploded. It exploded and it burned.

Roughly 180 tons of radioactive fuel in that reactor at Chernobyl that blew up sent radioactive cesium, and iodine and lots else into the air. About 50 people on site were killed by radiation relatively quickly. Hundreds of thousands of people were evacuated. More than 200,000 people were permanently moved.

A 19-mile radius around the plant is still called the zone of alienation. It is not considered fit

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for human habitation. Hundreds of square miles of Eastern Europe were hit by radioactive fallout from Chernobyl.

And the health consequences were significant, particularly in terms of thyroid cancer. Rates of thyroid cancer are 50 to 100 times higher than they were before the disaster in Ukraine and in Belarus.

One of our guests this hour will be Laurie Garrett, best-selling author, Pulitzer winner. She's now at the Council on Foreign Relations. She wrote for the Council on Foreign Relations that incidence of adult and pediatric thyroid cancer in the region right around Chernobyl is today more than 500 times what it was before that disaster, higher than anything else ever seen on Earth.

These things take time, but ultimately, thousands of cancer deaths that would not have otherwise taken place will be blamed on the radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl disaster. That's what we're talking about here. We tend to think of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl almost as metaphors, as big, bad ideas, but they are specific things.

And when you've heard people saying that's what's happening in Japan so far is worse than Three Mile Island, but not as bad as Chernobyl—well, OK. It's good to understand that, but it's also good to understand that there's a lot of room between the consequences of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. Not just the magnitude and the type of accidents themselves, but the

consequences of those accidents, how much radioactivity was released, and what it did to people.

The ongoing crisis in Japan is about trying to minimize the amount of radiation that's going to be released from these reactors at Daiichi. Understanding the difference between this disaster and previous nuclear disasters is empirical. It is a quantitative thing. It is understandable even if you're not a physicist. I certainly am not.

Here's what we've got in Japan. We've got six reactors, OK? Six reactors altogether at Daiichi. Three of them—numbers one, two, and three were on, were producing power when the earthquake hit. They automatically shut down, and now, it has been a matter of keeping enough water flowing into the cooling systems of those reactors to keep those hot radioactive fuel rods covered up so they don't melt any more than they already have.

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In all of those reactors though, there's not just fuel rods in the reactors themselves, there are also just pools that contain other somewhat hot, somewhat radioactive fuel rods. So, in each of the six reactors at Daiichi, as far as we understand it, there is a reactor, but there is also a spent fuel pool—spent fuel that's already done its six years or whatever in the nuclear reactor. And now, it is spent enough that it is no longer efficient enough to use in the reactor.

But these fuel rods in spent fuel pools—they're still hot. They're still radioactive and they still need active cooling systems to keep them covered in water so they don't start to breakdown and then meltdown. In each of those reactors, one through six, there's both the reactor and a spent fuel pool.

There have been hydrogen explosions already at reactors one, two, and three. All three were reactors working when the quake hit. Even if you know nothing about this stuff, you can see just by looking at the photos that we've got of them that the containment buildings that are—look at this—the containment buildings that are supposed to keep these sealed tighter than the tightest drum you can imagine, the containment buildings are busted open by what has already happened, right?

These are one, two, and three. But it's number four that is really worth understanding today. It appears to be number four. Look—it appears to be number four that drove the U.S. government to pretty dramatically break with the Japanese government today, to start giving

its own American assessment of what is going on at this reactor and that these reactors instead of repeating what the Japanese were saying. It's number four, or at least it appears to be the number four reactor that has led the U.S. government to say that U.S. citizens should evacuate from an area around the reactor that is larger than what the Japanese government has suggested.

Here's what's going on at reactor four: reactor four reportedly contains 130 tons of spent fuel, OK? So, there's a reactor there. There's also—that was off when the quake happened. But it's still there.

There's the reactor there that was off. That's presumably cool shut down. Then there's also the spent fuel pool, 130 tons of spent fuel in that pool.

For reference, that's about 28 percent less fuel than what blew up at Chernobyl. The U.S.

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Nuclear Regulatory Commission reportedly has its own experts on site at Daiichi. And even though Japan is not saying this yet, American nuclear authorities, our nuclear regulatory commission, today said that the pool that those 130 tons of fuel are sitting in, that pool is dry. It's empty—which means those fuel rods are fully exposed.

If that's true, those fuel rods will melt. They may catch fire. There may be an explosion, not a nuclear explosion but an explosion that could put the radioactivity in that fuel into the air.

Again, we think it is 130 tons of fuel there. For reference, it was 180 tons of fuel at Chernobyl.

Look again at the picture of reactor four. It still does have sort of a roof, but not much else. So, whatever is happening to those fuel rods there, there's really no containment of that really at all. It's going out into the air.

There's also reportedly a concern about the spent fuel pool at reactor three, which is right next to number four. We do not know how much fuel is in that spent fuel pool there or how fresh or how radioactive that fuel is exactly. But the Nuclear Regulatory Commission today said they fear that the pool holding the spent fuel at reactor three may be cracked.

And that, if it's true, would pose a real challenge for trying to keep fuel rods there covered in water. If they're sitting in a pool

that's cracked, how do you fill up the pool? Even if they can water to them by fire hose or by other means, it may be hard to cover them up.

This video—look—this video has just started airing on Japanese NHK television in the last few minutes. It shows what we think is—what we think are helicopters dropping liquid over what appears to be reactors three and four.

As at Chernobyl, it is workers on site who are incurring the most risk, who are putting their lives at what maybe immediate risk given the high levels of radiation on site already.

But here's the thing, here's the thing that is becoming clear about sort of the end game here—or at least the end game of these efforts. And it is a rather dire but logical calculation. What these workers are doing in trying to use fire hoses or in trying to use helicopters dropping liquid, or in trying to reestablish

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power to conventional pumping systems, or in trying even to vent pressure from these reactors as they're cooled, what the workers are doing ultimately now is trying to stop emissions of radiation at Daiichi, right?

As the situation gets more dire, what they're trying to do is frankly stop so much radiation from being emitted there that it kills the workers there. They need to control the radiation enough that it stays possible for humans to keep working there. Forget safe. I mean possible.

These are large problems that require heroic human attention. They will not get better on their own. What is being done there now must be effective enough to keep the plant safe enough so that humans can continue to work there.

We have expert opinion next on whether that is happening.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: This information I'm about to show you has been reported by Japan's NHK News but it has not widely been reported in the United States. So, we wanted to get it on record here.

This roughly is what's at stake in the Daiichi nuclear plant crisis. For reference, the amount of nuclear fuel in the reactor that blew up in Chernobyl was roughly 180 tons. You can see these are—these tags have individual numbers on them. This is what we believe is the amount

of nuclear fuel in each of the reactors at Daiichi, OK?

Reactors one, two and three were on when the earthquake struck, as you know, they've been shut down. There's been difficulty keeping them cooled since the quake. Each of those reactors has suffered at least some damage. Together in one, two, and three, there's about 210 tons of fuel in the course of those three reactors.

Now, this is the amount of fuel we believe to be in the spent fuel pools inside each of the reactors, OK? Unit four is the one that the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission said today might be totally dry with the rods totally exposed. If that's true, that's 130 tons of nuclear fuel that we are talking about.

The other pool considered to be also potentially in danger is in reactor three. That's another 90 tons of fuel. Units five and six

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where the temperatures of the water in pools is reported to be rising, those have even larger amounts of fuel, and the largest amount of fuel is actually in a common spent fuel pool that is outside any of the individual six reactors.

As spent fuel gets older, it gets less hot and less radioactive. So, to the extent that those spent fuel pools are at risk of losing their cooling systems and those fuel rods are at risk to being exposed to the air and getting damaged, what you are hoping for is that damaged fuel rods are older. You're hoping them to be older, with, therefore, less radioactivity to give off.

Again, these figures are from NHK News in Japan.

We were in communication today with nuclear experts in the U.S. who are in communication with nuclear experts in Japan. They said these were essentially the reportable known numbers for what is at stake in Daiichi.

Bottom line: there is a lot of radioactive material at stake here.

We will be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JAMES MATES, ITV NEWS (voice-over): This is not a site designed to inspire confidence: firefighting helicopters preparing to drop water onto overheating nuclear reactors. It's

an admission that every other efforts has failed, and soon, this act of desperation was to fail, too, there was too much radiation for the pilots to fly safely.

The Fukushima complex can only be seen now through mist and rising smoke, fitting perhaps given the fog of confusion and misinformation coming from the Japanese government.

This is the scene today in Tokyo on streets normally teeming with people during a working day. Since radiation levels here were upgraded or elevated, millions have been staying indoors or heading to the airport in the hope of an available flight.

A deeply worried nation now voting with its feet.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: It was James Mates of ITV News

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reporting from earlier today.

Just in the last hour, we have had new images of those firefighting helicopters making another pass at it and actually dropping liquid on what appears to be reactors three and four at the stricken Daiichi nuclear plant. We've had word from NHK News in Japan that those are Chinook helicopters and they've been specially outfitted to try to protect the crews from radiation that they would otherwise be exposed to by flying so close to those stricken reactors.

Joining us now is Ed Lyman, senior staff scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists. He testified before the Senate Environment and Public Works today on the crisis in Japan.

Dr. Lyman, thanks for coming back on the show.

EDWIN LYMAN, UNION OF CONCERNED SCIENTISTS: Thanks for having me again.

MADDOW: When you see those images of those Chinook helicopters dropping liquid from the sky onto reactors three and four, where we think there may be spent fuel rods in pools that are having cooling trouble—how does that make you feel about the overall response here?

LYMAN: Well, I think that they are trying everything they can possibly do, and that's appropriate. I mean, they need to try every possible measure. But the fact that the radiation levels are prohibitive for carrying out

these measures is disturbing. And I wonder how long it can be sustained.

MADDOW: The U.S. government today gave a more dire technical assessment of what's going on in Japan than we've been hearing from the Japanese government. The U.S. then changed its advice to U.S. citizens accordingly, advising Americans to evacuate further from the reactor area than Japan had been advising. Do you know why that shift happened?

LYMAN: Well, the NRC apparently published some calculations on its Web site that showed that there would still be significant doses 50 miles away from the site if all four reactors were to melt down.

Now, this is really no surprise. Anyone who's familiar with these types of assessments knows that 50 miles is not safe distance to be in an emergency like that. So, I think, finally, the NRC is trying to come to grips with the fact

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that there is a real danger much further away than the 10-mile emergency planning zones that it licenses here in the United States.

MADDOW: So, a reactor facing a similar crisis in the United States, the evacuation zone would be default 10 miles?

LYMAN: That's right.

MADDOW: In reactor four, what the NRC said specifically today in testimony, in verbal testimony, was that all the water in number four reactor spent fuel pool is gone. If that has happened, if those fuel rods are in a dry pool, what happens to them? What happens there?

LYMAN: Well, I'd just like to caution, there's some dispute over whether that's true. But just assuming it is, if the spent fuel is completely dry, then heat transfer is significantly reduced and heat up of the fuel would accelerate. This would cause fuel rods to expand, eventually to rupture, and first to release the gas that's already accumulated within the spent fuel. And then as the uranium pellets in the fuel continue to heat up, more and more radioactive material will be squeezed out of the pellets, mostly in the form of cesium-137, which would be a gas at those temperatures.

So, if the fuel pool has gone dry, that would be a very hard condition to reverse.

MADDOW: Is there at that point a risk of fire or explosion? And do either of those matter at that point?

LYMAN: Well, there would be presumably a fire, because the metal crating around the fuel rods, which is zirconium, will actually start to burn once it reaches a certain ignition temperature. So, there could be a zirconium fed fire that would only serve to increase heat up of the rods and accelerate radioactive release.

This wouldn't typically result in an explosion of the fuel, but the reaction with zirconium does produce hydrogen which could lead to hydrogen explosion if it got concentrated. But since these are now well-ventilated spaces, since the roof and walls have blown off, probably hydrogen explosions aren't much concern at this point.

MADDOW: Well-ventilated is a happy way to say it. I mean—

LYMAN: I'm sorry.

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MADDOW: No, it's true. I mean—I mean, to be clear, there's essentially no effective containment of any kind around these spent fuel pools in reactors three and four, right?

LYMAN: Well, the sad truth is even if the walls and ceiling were still in place, that still wouldn't have been an effective containment. It might have provided some delay, but now, of course, there's nothing. Radioactive material that is emitted from the fuel will go right into the atmosphere.

MADDOW: The radiation levels have gotten so high that as you noted, there is a question of whether or not they can safely manage these efforts to try to get water onto these—onto these fuel rods or these reactor cores.

Have the temperature or have the radiation levels gotten so high that we should expect to see them working in shifts or rotating every few minutes? I mean, could any of the cooling be automated? Can all of the cooling be automated or are we at the point the instrumentation is no good and everything has to be done manually?

LYMAN: Well, I've heard very recent reports that the authorities are trying to restore off site power to the pumps that ordinarily cool the reactors. If that were the case, then they might be able to pull back to some extent. So, I think that would be a very positive sign. But I'm not sure if it will work or not.

You know, I'm not privy to the numbers. But the fact that the Japanese keep withdrawing

personnel, putting them back, pulling them out again, obviously, is indication that the environment near the reactors is extremely severe and I do worry very much for the health and safety of those workers.

MADDOW: Ed Lyman, senior staff scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists—being able to call your expertise here is a real asset for us. Thanks for testifying to Congress today and thanks for joining us tonight.

LYMAN: Thank you.

MADDOW: It is easy to be scared. It is easier still to scare others when there's a situation like the one that is unfolding in Japan right now. Being scared and being smart, though, go together about as well as orange juice and toothpaste—which is why understanding this stuff is a better idea than freaking out about this stuff. And that is why the "New York Daily News" newspaper was singularly unhelpful

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when they chose their banner front page for today's editions. That's coming up.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

LEE COWAN, NBC NEWS CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): As the snow began to fall, we began a drive that would bring us within miles of the damaged reactors. By necessity, it's where the road goes.

The radio is our constant companion. The news is rarely good, but the advice is.

(on camera): So, we're just outside the affected area now. We've been told to stop. And as precaution, what we are supposed to do, turn off the vents, turn off the air conditioning as well, make sure windows that are rolled up. We're not getting out of the car until we'll well-past the affected area.

(voice-over): The cold temperatures, though, make it tough.

(on camera): Still snowing outside. So, we can't have any vents on.

We got to keep the windows clear of fogging up, especially for our driver.

(voice-over): At the other side of the road rolls one reminder after another that Japan is a nation with twin disasters. Convoys of rescue vehicles race in the opposite direction into the tsunami zone, unable to stay behind to help

those trapped too close to the reactors.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: That's NBC's Lee Cowan in Japan today.

Again, we've had images in the past hour of the Japanese Chinook helicopters. They say they're especially-equipped to protect the crews from radiation. Chinook helicopters dropping liquid on the Daiichi nuclear facility. They are now saying that liquid was being dropped just on reactor three, not on reactors three and four as they said earlier.

They had said that there was going to be planned 40-minute long shifts for those helicopter water airlifts. From what we can tell, they did not complete a full 40-minute shift today. We don't know why.

Helicopters have now pulled back. And we

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have word that they are bringing in water canons to try to keep this rather desperate cooling operation going.

This is nuclear safety in extremist.

Joining us now is Laurie Garrett. She's a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. She's a senior fellow for Global Health with the Council on Foreign Relations. And she's a best selling author of "Betrayal of Trust: The Collapse of Global, Public Health."

Laurie Garrett, thank you for coming in.

LAURIE GARRETT, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS: Thank you.

MADDOW: There is a human health catastrophe that has already upon us in terms of the survivors of the quake and the tsunami. There is a major health challenge for dealing with the threat from these reactors, the potential escalation of that if things get worse there.

How can a government do this well? Are there models of good response to challenges this big?

GARRETT: This one's huge. I don't know if you could really find a government that had to deal with so many things all at once. But, clearly, we could look at examples where it wasn't done well—say, Katrina, for example—where the messaging was not clear.

I do think the Kan government is watching this very fine line between trying to get people to evacuate, taking problems seriously, follow government instructions—at the same time, not have people go into hysteria, thinking that every gulp of air they breathe is toxic, everything they eat will kill them, that the water is unsafe and so on. And, you know, when you think of it in international terms, we've got people right here in New York City running out and buying iodine tablets, which is completely absurd and that absolutely is totally unwarranted.

So, we have a balancing act here on the home front. Now, imagine you had a tsunami, an earthquake. You've got the power plants, and, by the way, bird flu in five different locations in the country.

Now, put that all together, try to figure out how to get rational instructions to your population so that they know what to do and

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they trust the government. And one of the things we see constantly coming through in all of the interviews that people do is this sort of vox populi, is this element of distrust, not sure who to believe, not sure if they're telling us everything, is the company telling the truth at Daiichi, is the government telling the truth and so on.

We would have the same problem here. It's a common, common problem.

MADDOW: With the radiation issue specifically, and I want to ask you about this just because we've been covering it so intently. We talked at the top of the show about what really happened in Three Mile Island, what really happened in Chernobyl, to try to make those more real and less abstract concepts.

Do you think we broadly have a realistic concept of what nuclear disasters mean in terms of human impact? Or are they nebulous and scary and not the sort of things that lead us towards rational responses?

GARRETT: Well, for the general public, it's nebulous and scary. For

those on top of these situations and learned from each successive disaster

nuclear bomb test and other horrible things that have happened—we actually know quite a bit. We know the most vulnerable organ in terms of most of what's released, radioactive iodides, is the thyroid gland.

MADDOW: Which is why everybody is taking those pills.

GARRETT: Yes, and the thyroid gland especially vulnerable if you're a child. And what we saw, for example, after Chernobyl, is that the bulk of thyroid diseases, including cancer, were in people who were small children at the time they were exposed.

MADDOW: The news today that the U.S. government in essence is recommending a larger—in actualities, recommending a larger evacuation than the Japanese government, they're actually giving out different and more dire technical information than the Japanese government is—does that have indirect consequences in terms of managing panic, in terms of what counts as trustworthy authority here?

I mean, look at the way that we're showing this on our graphic right now. Evacuation area,

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where to stay indoors, and where the U.S. says you should evacuate from. Does that have big, broad consequences in terms of who people trust and how they think about information?

GARRETT: Absolutely. I really think that the American government and the Japanese government should be in synch.

MADDOW: Yes.

GARRETT: It's very scary if you're sitting in Tokyo, you understand English, you're watching the American broadcasting, MSNBC in your hotel—you may think, wait a minute, why are the Americans saying this and my own government is saying something quite different? It doesn't help matters.

But we see this all the time. We saw it with the flu pandemic threat two years ago. We see this with—any time there's a big threat out there that potentially could cross borders, you get different advice from different governments.

MADDOW: Do you think there is a robust enough global health structure or that the Japanese government health structures are strong enough if this really does end up being something where the fallout is going to have health consequences for hundreds of thousands of people?

GARRETT: I think the Japanese are in better shape than anybody. If you had to be—if you had to pick a country and ask what's the level of governance, how deep is their infrastructure for public health and their

medical infrastructure, you couldn't pick a better one than Japan. For one thing, they don't have 52 million uninsured citizens.

MADDOW: Yes. Laurie Garrett, Council on Foreign Relations, senior fellow there, best selling author, Pulitzer Prize-winner—it's really helpful to have you here. Thank you.

GARRETT: Thank you.

MADDOW: Experts may disagree on exactly what should be done right now to try to mitigate the worst of this disaster, but what we all agree we should definitely not do, not now, not ever, is panic. So could somebody please explain this? Please? That's next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: Here in New York City, one of our local papers, the "New York Daily News," is reporting on the nuclear crisis in Japan on its

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msnbc.com

front page today like this. “Japan Nuke Disaster: Panic!” Can you see that? Here’s a closer look at it. I think we have. Yes.

Black background, giant white block letters, all caps, “Panic!”

Here’s the thing: there are many increasingly worrying developments coming out of Japan every single day, and while it can be fun to sort of panic about, say, the prospect of Donald Trump as president or the really, clickly, panicky new redesign at this Jalopnik.com which I find very frustrating and that’s Web site I like.

While it can be sort of fun to panic about stupid stuff like that, it is not a good idea to panic about real things which are really, legitimately scary. Which is to say, you, “New York Daily News,” you and your scary, grainy headline, you are not helping!

As the terror-inducing “New York Daily News” front page informs us by way of—scream black letters—there has been something of a run on potassium iodide pills.

Potassium iodide is an over-the-counter drug that can be used to guard against the specific kind of health hazard from a specific kind of radiation exposure. It is not best described as our friends at “The Daily News” chose to show it as an anti-nuke pill, it’s not like it’s a big umbrella that just protects you from fallout, just pop this magic umbrella pill—it is not like that. What it can do is help the thyroid not absorb radioactive iodine—as Laurie Garrett

was just explaining. If you are exposed to iodine, taking that potassium iodine can essentially prevent your thyroid from taking up the radioactive stuff because it will be plum full of the not radioactive kind.

This sort of thing does not protect against other radioactive isotopes. It is just radioactive iodine. The primary manufacturer of this drug in the U.S. now says it is out of stock because so many people want, because of the nuclear crisis in Japan. The president of the company telling Agence France Press today, “The spike is enormous. We were out of stock by Friday night.”

But we’re not talking about a spike in demand coming just from Japan, where all the radiation actually is, quote, “the demand mostly is coming from the West Coast of the United States.”

Public officials have been campaigning hard

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against the apparently widespread impulse among American West Coasters to respond to the nuclear crisis in Japan by buying potassium iodide.

The L.A. County Public Health Department went so far as to issue a health advisory cautioning residents specifically to avoid taking it, saying, quote, “Residents who ingest potassium iodide out of concern of possible exposure from the situation are doing something which is not only ineffective but could also cause side effects.”

California state health department set up a radiation hot line to answer Californians’ concerns about radiation. Much to the state’s dismay, as of yesterday, when they answered those calls, many, many, many of the people calling were just calling to try to buy potassium iodide pills. The health department spokesperson that was, quote, “very concerning to us because you really should not take that without professional advice— unless you are within the zone of the nuclear event.”

If you are not watching me from northern Japan right now, you are not within the zone of the nuclear event.

When asked by “The Associated Press” about everyone on the American West Coast who’s trying to get their hands on potassium iodide pills, the director of radiation health physics at Oregon State University told “The A.P.,” quote, “Tell them, ‘Stop, don’t do it.’” According to “The A.P.” the federal government already

stockpiles the drug and offers enough for states to give doses to every American resident within 10 miles of a nuclear plant.

So, “New York Daily News” headline writers, be darned. Let’s ditch the instruction to panic.

And let’s talk to someone who can tell us what the real risks and what they are not.

Joining us now is David Richardson, professor in the department of epidemiology at University of North Carolina.

Professor Richardson, thanks very much for your time tonight. It’s nice to have you with us.

DAVID RICHARDSON, UNC EPIDEMIOLOGY PROFESSOR: Thank you for having me.

MADDOW: The White House is recommending that U.S. citizens stay 50 miles away from the Daiichi plant. The Japanese government is

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recommending 20 miles.

Would exposure levels be substantially different between those two different distances?

RICHARDSON: Yes. Exposure levels are going to be different. I mean, there's been a projection of what exposure levels are under different models. The NRC is following projections for four reactor accident.

That said, right now, we don't have good information how the exposures are distributed—what's been released and where it is going. It's not—it's very unlikely that the exposures are traveling in concentric circles. But I think the judgment has been that yes, 50 mile radius is what's been advocated.

MADDOW: In terms of what has been released thus far in terms of radiation, obviously, we had some radioactive releases from those plants. That's what we've seen in terms of the different readings that we've had from different Japanese cities about how much radiation they're detecting there. The bigger worry is that there could be an even larger release of radiation at some point in the future.

Based on what's happened so far, what might happen in the future—who will be facing the greatest risk as a release—as a result of a radioactive fallout? Is it mostly defined by where you are geographically or is it mostly defined by who you are?

RICHARDSON: That's a great question. The—right now, the people facing the greatest risk are obviously the workers. And when—if you move beyond that to consider people who are not at risk of being primarily externally exposed to radiation from working in high radiation fields, you're getting into an area of concern about people who are going to inhale or ingest radioactive particles or radioactive gases.

And as you mentioned earlier in the show, the uptake and dose delivered to specific organs, for example, the thyroid, depends on your age and it also depends on other individual characteristics. So, age is going to be an important factor. But dose is a critical factor, and dose is going to vary as a function of location and distance.

MADDOW: To be clear in terms of difference in ages, it's kids who are most—who have the most at risk in terms of radioactive iodine

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exposure?

RICHARDSON: Right. And it's—that's for several reasons. One of them simply the smaller mass of the thyroid.

MADDOW: Are iodine pills a good preventive measure for people in Japan?

RICHARDSON: I think that they should, in Japan and United States, both as you mentioned recently, I think people should follow the advice of the public health authorities. If history can give us some guidance, a lot of the route of uptake after environmental releases of radio iodine is not through inhalation of the gas itself, but through kind of milk pathways of the iodine accumulating and people taking it up later.

So, as much as there's a focus on, say, therapeutic prevention through taking of potassium iodide, there are other measures. Simply avoiding milk consumption, or using tin milk is another option.

MADDOW: David Richardson, professor of in the department of epidemiology at the University of North Carolina thanks very much for your time tonight, professor. It's good to have you here.

RICHARDSON: Thank you.

MADDOW: So, I hesitate to even ask, but you should know. Do you want to know how Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck are characterizing the disaster in Japan? I'm not going to go into

detail about it. But suffice to say, they are using the word "payback." Yes.

Ed Schultz has a few comments of his own about that at the top of the hour. You will not want to miss it.

And on the opposite end of the compassion index, the U.S. military delivered 17 tons of supplies, food, water and blankets to Japan yesterday. We'll have the latest on how Americans are providing some desperately needed aid during this crisis, including some technology I did not know that we had as a nation until I read about it tonight. That's coming up.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: There's obviously no story in the world that has the gravity of the unfolding catastrophe in Japan. But there really is a ton of other pretty important news going on in the

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world. So, now, a deep breath, and some of the other stories we have been following, both tonight and for the last few days.

Starting in Libya—where today we learned that four journalists working for “The New York Times” have been missing since yesterday morning. Among them, Pulitzer Prize winner Anthony Shadid. The paper reporting today that according to secondhand sources, the journalists were, quote, “swept up” by Libyan government forces in the city of Ajdabiya. Gadhafi’s forces took that city back from rebels yesterday.

Before he went missing, Anthony Shadid reported in “The Times” that Ajdabiya was the last defense line before the city of Benghazi, the rebel-held city of Benghazi.

Mr. Gadhafi’s son, Saif, in a series of television interviews today, proverbially pounded his chest and predicted that all of the rebels throughout Libya would be defeated within 48 hours.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SAIF AL-ISLAM GADHAFI, GADHAFI’S SON: Tobruk, in a few hours, that army will be there. You will see the picture there, people celebrating, everybody will welcome the armed forces and the volunteers, because they have been waiting for this for a long time.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: Meanwhile, in Bahrain, riot police

and military troops backed by helicopters attacked anti-government protesters, driving them out of their stronghold in the heart of the capital city. Three protesters and three police were reportedly killed. An unknown number of people were wounded.

Government forces also took over a nearby hospital, after blocking ambulances and reportedly keeping medical personnel from tending to the wounded who made it inside.

Here’s what a doctor inside that hospital told the BBC.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE (via telephone): They’re not allowing us to go out. They’ve got—they’ve got snipers. They’ve got commandos. They’ve got anti-riot police. And it’s like we’re being held hostages in the hospital. They’re not allowing us to go out and the patients are not

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allowed to be brought in.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: The government of Bahrain has now banned protests. They imposed a curfew. Today's events prompting President Obama to call the king of Bahrain to express his concern over the violence and to call for restraint. Mr. Obama also called the king of Saudi Arabia with the same message.

Why call Saudi Arabia? Because earlier this week, Saudi Arabia sent in its own forces to back up the current regime in Bahrain.

In Pakistan, Raymond Davis, an American CIA contractor who's been in jail since late January, has been released from prison and has left the country. Mr. Davis was accused of murdering two Pakistanis in what he claims was self-defense during a robbery attempt. His arrest and those murders have prompted nationwide protests in Pakistan.

An American official confirms to "The Washington Post" that Mr. Davis was freed after the victims' families were paid. They were paid so-called blood money as compensation for their loss.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is denying that the U.S. government paid any blood money in order to get Mr. Davis released.

In domestic news, that's not Japan, Wisconsin Republicans celebrated the one-week anniversary tonight of their pyrrhic victory

over the rights of people who have to work for a living. They held a fundraising event today at a Washington, D.C. lobbying firm.

It's probably a fundraising event because they need a lot of money now. Eight of the Republican state senators in Wisconsin are fighting off strong recall drives. Those recall drives were the trophy they got for stripping public employee unions to rights of collective bargaining.

The lobbying firm that is stepping up for the beleaguered Wisconsin Republicans is a firm called BGR group. The "B" in BGR stands for "Barbour," Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, the presidential hopeful who used to work there and whose son is now a vice president.

And the protesters outside that event—these days, of course, being a Wisconsin Republican equals protesters outside—those protesters are organized with help from national

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progressive groups like Move On.

This Wisconsin story is a national story, a bigger story all the time. And what I think should probably be a way bigger national story than it is, thousands of protesters turned out in Lansing, Michigan, today, the capital, pushing back against Governor Rick Snyder's plan to balance that state's budget, sort of, or actually to pretend to be balancing the state's budget by giving tax breaks to corporations and instead raising taxes on the elderly and on poor families with children.

Also by cutting off aid to towns and cities in Michigan. Governor Snyder knows that will hurt. So, this afternoon, he tried to sign a truly incredible new law. It will give his administration the right to declare a town or school board to be in such dire straits that it needs taken over by an emergency manager. That new boss will be empowered to dissolve the entire local government and to dissolve all local contracts, including naturally union contracts.

Lastly, failed Nevada Senate candidate, Sharron Angle, remember her?

She's returned. Thanks to soon to be former Senator John Ensign. Mr. Ensign says he is not running again. So, a congressman named Dean Heller will be running for Mr. Ensign's seat in 2012.

Now, Sharron Angle, she of Second Amendment remedies, she lost badly in her quest to unseat Senate Majority Leader Harry

Reid last year, she likes her chances to get to Capitol Hill this way.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SHARRON ANGLE®, FORMER NEVADA SENATORIAL CANDIDATE: The 2010 election was bittersweet. Conservatives had some victories, but we still face obstacles from Democrats in Congress and in the White House. That's why today, I'm announcing I am running for the United States Congress. The effort to bring the people's voice back into government did not end in 2010.

I'm Sharron Angle. I approve this message and I'm asking for your support.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: So, if the bitterness of 2010 for you was that the Second Amendment remedies lady didn't win, do over.

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We'll be back in just a moment.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: Not long after the Planet Earth became a world with nuclear weapons, the U.S. decided it should be someone's job to detect atomic explosions. General Dwight D. Eisenhower decided to hand that responsibility to the military, to the Army Air Forces on September 16th, 1947. He commissioned the Constant Phoenix program, with planes capable of sampling the air so it could be tested for radiation.

Two days later, on September 18th of that year, the Army Air Forces became its own military branch, the United States Air Force.

And so, today, the United States Air Force has got two of these planes based in Nebraska. Over the years, they detected nuclear debris from Russia's first atomic test. They've supported the limited nuclear test ban treaty. They investigated North Korea's self-described nuclear tests and they even flew missions over the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster in 1986.

You can now add to that list the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. The U.S. Pacific Command has approved sending one of our nation's Constant Phoenix planes to Japan. And their current incarnation, the Constant Phoenix are converted Boeing 707s, 130 feet across, with a maximum speed of over 400 miles an hour.

The U.S. military also said it has delivered high-pressure water pumps to the Fukushima Daiichi plant.

Our coverage of the ongoing Japanese disaster and more continues now with Ed Schultz. Good night.

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