

# Savannah River Parkway

Officially it's called the Savannah River Plant, or SRP. Many call it the bomb factory. It is located 15 miles east of Augusta, Ga, where I live and work. Most people know little of what occurs there every day, despite the fact that SRP is responsible for the manufacture of virtually all the nuclear weapons materials in our country. Covering more than 600 square miles of land, the facility is tremendous.

I drive through SRP occasionally, usually on my way to the beach. Highway 125 takes you through the heart of the complex for 20 miles. The early sun beams brightly through the windshield, promising a day of the childhood frolicking, core-body warming, and spiritual nourishment that occur only with ocean sounds. Yet, for 20 minutes, silent nuclear sounds eclipse the sun, waiting for an exit reprieve. The signs, buildings, roads, and security personnel offer small reality reminders, standing in stark contrast to the thick pine forests and deer crossings.

They allow you to drive through, neither slower nor faster than posted limits. They time you. I usually pass through quickly, thinking they will ask me why I drove 65 mph. But I never get asked. At these times, they must sense I am not a real security threat.

Other times I stop before driving through. On these occasions my responsibility is clear: to join in collective human protest at the vast absurdity of the current nuclear weapons mind-set. As one of only several physicians who join the 50 or fewer yearly protesters, my role is as both physician and citizen. We make our statement to a largely unwitnessed audience, appealing to a higher authority. Usually there are more security officers than protesters.

There are guardhouses as you enter or leave the highway. Not quite true homes, these security checkpoints are staffed by friendly officers who write down your license plate number, the number of occupants in your car, and the time you enter or leave the facility. One is never sure for whom these guards work, us or them. Identities are confusing.

Then there are the monster pipes, or so they seem. For steaming, condensing, cooling, evaporating, transport, or transit, it is all the same. Crisscrossing the sky, these huge metal containers carry the molten lava in a maze, down the slanted landscape, stopping to rise above the throughway before sloping down again the other side and continuing forward. From left to right as far as the eye can see, like a ghost, who knows where it comes or goes? If you slow down enough as you pass under the pipes, you will see liquid drops falling with steam rising, even in July.

The road is designed to keep you honest. Narrow and smooth, it has frequent dips and curves, valleys and shallows. The asphalt, cobweb gray, is well paved with few bumps to distract your attention. The yellow lines are crisply painted and meticulously placed, reminding one even at 55 mph of rules and regulations. One does not stop for fear of being caught, hit, or arrested. There are no roadside curbs for emergencies.

And the buildings, these you cannot see from the road. Left to the imagination, they are concrete, cold, and harsh. Nameless and faceless, they are much like an unknown enemy, never identified. I, like most Americans, have never met a Russian citizen. Somehow, though, I feel that they are more like me than the buildings.

The signs tell a story; two, that is. "No Stopping Allowed." "Defense Is Our Security." "Your Job Depends on Security." Designed by sign psychologists, they are strategically placed, constant reminders that you are either guest or intruder in this strange nature preserve. They are large enough that visitors, even those with far less than 20/20 vision, can read them at a distance without glasses. Since there are no other signs, you read theirs, the black-and-white details reminding you of good and evil.

In between the signs lies the other story. Thick, opulent forests, filled with evergreens, spruce, and maple, fortress the view. Deer, waterfowl, and other birds coexist in harmony with little regard for serpents. On careful inspection, however, you will find that even the trees are purposefully placed, their types, numbers, and locations. As if planning a family, little is left to chance, and the camouflage is perfect. It is ironic that the animals live free from fear while their human counterparts, driven by mistrust, remain enslaved.

When driving away from the plant, we feel relieved, temporarily released from thoughts of war, death, and disease. Yet this drive really does not do the facility justice. We do not see the radioactive wastes hidden in leaking storage tanks, smell the accidental releases that "pose no harm," hear the operator errors that are only human, feel the insidious environmental damage. Nor do we sense the fierce attachment of local communities and workers to SRP's economic security.

Eventually feelings of responsibility and reality take hold. What about the ethics of nuclear war, its political, social, environmental, and medical consequences? We see patients on welfare, others with no health insurance. Polluted rivers and lakes lie stagnant. Poverty and hunger surround us. Affordable housing for some and any home for others remain unachieved. We see, smell, hear, and feel the daily effects of the arms race.

Perhaps, you and I, we can begin to drive through life with open eyes. Working toward a safer and saner world, we can convert nuclear weapons to renewable resources, radioactivity to drug-free communities, contamination to cures. Making things appear as they seem, SRP would be the Savannah River Parkway, where nature and humankind live in harmony with one another.

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