



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Inez Austin - Protecting the Public Safety at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation

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Description

This page presents the case of whistleblower Inez Austin as an example of someone who, even in the face of overwhelming adversity, followed her ethical convictions and refused to sanction a procedure she believed to be unsafe. The information in this page is drawn from extensive personal communications with Inez Austin.

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I. Introduction

In 1992, Inez Austin received the [Scientific Freedom and Responsibility Award](#) from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) "for her courageous and persistent efforts to prevent potential safety hazards involving nuclear waste contamination" as a senior engineer at the [Hanford Site](#) in Washington state, a 586-square-mile former plutonium production facility. The AAAS said, "Ms. Austin's stand in the face of harassment and intimidation reflects the paramount professional duty of engineers -- to protect the public's health and safety -- and has served as an inspiration to her co-workers."

The incident that began Inez Austin's reputation as a whistleblower was her refusal, in June of 1990, to approve a plan to pump radioactive waste from an aging underground single-shell tank at the Hanford Site to a double-shell tank. She believed the process to be too dangerous to certify. The events that followed changed her life forever. Although she came to be regarded highly by environmental and ethics groups, she was subjected to a career-destroying combination of harassment, bureaucratic maneuvering, and ostracization. Several years later, a second whistleblowing incident would lead to the end of her work at the Hanford Site.

This Online Ethics Center presents the case of Inez Austin as an example of someone who followed her ethical convictions in the face of overwhelming adversity and refused to sanction a procedure she believed to be unsafe.

(Note: The history and legacy of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation and the problems with cleanup and other incidents of whistleblowing at the Hanford Site have been the subject of many essays and discussions. This case only discusses Hanford and other Hanford whistleblowers as background to the Inez Austin story. For more information on the Hanford Site see the [Inez Austin and Hanford Site links page](#).)

II. Blowing the Whistle

The Hanford Nuclear Reservation was originally created as part of the Manhattan Project and supplied plutonium for nuclear weapons. It was operated in secrecy by the federal government for more than 40 years, until 1989, when all operations ended and clean-up of vast amounts of hazardous waste and radioactive contamination was begun under the jurisdiction of the [Tri-Party Agreement](#) between the Department of Energy (DOE), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Washington State Department of Ecology. Under the Tri-Party Agreement, the reservation is now known as the Hanford Site and constitutes the largest radioactive waste site in the United States.

As one of the few female engineers at Westinghouse Hanford, the prime contractor for the DOE at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation/Hanford Site, Inez Austin consistently received excellent ratings for her work. In 1989, after ten years with the company, she was transferred from her position as an engineer in charge of calibration records to a new position as senior process engineer. Part of her job was to approve safety procedures regarding the process for pumping millions of gallons of highly radioactive wastes out of aging single-shell storage tanks. Austin was also a member of the Readiness Review Board, a Hanford task group that certified the safety of cleanup procedures.

In June 1990, Austin was asked to prepare a document to certify the safety of pumping dangerous liquid wastes out of five tanks in order to stabilize the tanks. A July 1 Tri-Party Agreement deadline for pumping these tanks was fast approaching, and the pumping issue required immediate attention.

Austin was concerned about the safety of the pumping operation because of the presence of ferrocyanide in the tanks. There were several relevant studies on the matter that were due to be completed soon, and Austin saw delaying the pumping until the dangers were clear as a prudent alternative.

Nevertheless, she submitted a proposal that adhered to safety principles regarding pumping procedures and recognized the necessary cautions. Unfortunately, her warnings were cut out of the proposal by her boss, Richard Kimura, before it was returned for her signature of approval on June 25. Austin realized that some people would be angry if she refused to sign the proposal, but her integrity and professional

responsibilities as an engineer mattered more.

Austin refused to sign. On June 27, after feeling additional pressure to sign the document, Austin felt discouraged and resigned from the Readiness Review Board. Austin was harassed and threatened by management and coworkers, rather than being recognized or commended for ethical behavior and her concern for health and safety.

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III. Austin Sees an Unacceptable Risk

Inez Austin's refusal to certify pumping procedures stemmed from the presence of ferrocyanide (FeCN) in two of the tanks. Ferrocyanide was used in the 1950s and 1960s as a flocculating agent, to bind dangerous substances in the liquid waste and allow them to be selectively removed. It has since been found that ferrocyanide becomes unstable over time. In October 1989, the U.S. Senate had assessed that this presence of ferrocyanide could be highly explosive under specific conditions and thus had to be pumped dry to prevent a possible explosion that would send large amounts of radioactive waste into the environment.

Images of Single Shell Tanks

A cross section drawing dated April 1994 of a Hanford single shell tank, with accompanying text.

A photograph of the interior of a Hanford single shell tank, showing the clotted surface of the tank.

Austin feared the risks involved in pumping these tanks. She was not a chemist -- "it's not my forte," she said -- but she did the necessary research and concluded there was sufficient risk to withhold certification for the two tanks in question.

"I thought there was maybe a one in ten chance of an accident," said Austin. "Probably wouldn't have happened, but ten percent is an unacceptable risk. It could have been a major disaster and caused several million dollars in damage."

She wanted to postpone pumping long enough for the relevant research on the problem to be finished. That research ultimately consumed about three more years. Austin's warnings were cut out of her report, but her refusal to sign did halt the risky

pumping plan.

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IV. Retaliation and Austin's Fight for Her Job

Inez Austin did not think that her refusal to approve a risky pumping procedure would result harassment and the loss of her job, but after she refused to sign the document, Kimura, her manager, threatened Austin with disciplinary action, claiming that Austin's work was causing inefficiency and low productivity. With the July 1 Tri-Party Agreement deadline looming, there was immediate pressure to begin pumping tanks. The state could take the federal government to court if cleanup deadlines were not met.

Austin's refusal to sign triggered several retaliatory actions. For example, in 1990 she received the lowest employee ratings in all her eleven years at Westinghouse Hanford. Remarks were made about the state of her mental health and she was asked to see a psychiatrist. At work, she was moved from her office to a dirty trailer and was not given significant work. She did not receive mail for eight weeks.

On July 1, 1991, the Energy Department's inspector general found that security personnel at Westinghouse Hanford had acquired and used equipment to wiretap and eavesdrop, in violation of DOE regulations and federal law ([NY Times, 8/1/91](#)). Much of this illegal surveillance was directed towards Austin. Austin also experienced other harassment, including a house break-in.

On October 11, 1990, Inez Austin filed an official complaint of on-the-job harassment with the DOE. Almost two months later, on December 4, she agreed to drop her complaint in return for a number of concessions: a new job, a month off with pay, removal of a letter of reprimand (concerning the incident in which she did not certify the pumping procedures) from her file, removal of other derogatory information from her file, and compensation for her attorney fees. Seemingly, the trouble would be over there. She was allowed to choose her new position, and decided to move to West Tank Farms Operations (WTFO). However, she was unable to receive any assignments there, being told by her new boss that he had been ordered not to give

her any work. Any work she did was on a strictly volunteer basis. This continued for nearly three years; during that stretch, she was not invited to meetings and any work she did was usually duplicated by someone else. Austin was further demoted on October 1, 1993.

Essentially, she was being paid for doing nothing and her training and experience as an engineer were being wasted. So Austin took drastic steps. Six days after her demotion, she called a news conference and informed the press that in the nearly three years since her settlement with the DOE, she had received no assignments. From that point on, she was assigned work. She was sent to Environmental Compliance Officer (ECO) school, but had to fight again to actually get the ECO position.

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V. Whistleblowing Round Two

Austin's job continued to bring her into the fray on controversial issues at the Hanford Site. In 1995, she was compelled to blow the whistle on questionable practices at the Hanford Site again. Austin was concerned about the safety and legality of untrained workers allowed into restricted areas and delays in pumping excess liquid from one of the tanks. Although Westinghouse issued an official finding about the untrained workers that was in agreement with Austin, she did not find that her warnings were well-received.

Finally, on February 28, 1996, after returning from a week's vacation, Austin was informed that her job had been posted during her vacation. She turned in her badge the next day.

Up to that point, it seemed that the higher Austin went with her complaints, the less of a reaction she got. So she went as high as she possibly could -- to Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary. They met on April 17, 1996, and O'Leary promised Austin that her termination would be put on hold and her paychecks would continue, but that never happened. Austin then filed a complaint with the Department of Labor (DOL) and won, but the settlement she was offered -- seven months back pay -- was not enough to make up for her lost job and the damage to her reputation and career. Austin sent an angry letter to O'Leary on December 9, 1996, documenting the

inadequacy of the settlement and her intention to pursue legal action.

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VI. Final Fallout

In the fall of 1997, Inez Austin filed suit against Westinghouse Hanford in Benton County (Washington) Superior Court, seeking compensation for the years of harassment and for wrongful termination from her job. After extended legal wrangling, the jury finally issued a verdict in November 2000, finding in favor of Westinghouse. The jury had decided that Austin was not fired in 1996, but instead had failed to reapply for her job when the tank farm operations were restructured. Austin appealed the ruling, then eventually settled amicably with Westinghouse out of court.

Professionally, it also took a long time for Austin's struggle to reach a conclusion. After leaving Hanford, she sent out hundreds of resumes, but received few responses.

"They [Westinghouse Hanford] told me that they'd 'make sure I never work again,'" said Austin in 1998, "and so far, that's been true."

It took Austin three years to find another job in the region. Finally, she worked part-time for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) in Pendleton, OR, 80 miles from her home. She worked in the field, traveling great distances to enforce solid waste and water quality standards. It was a job she enjoyed, despite the long hours in the car, but Austin eventually decided to leave after other former Hanford workers at the DEQ made the office politics uncomfortable.

In the meantime, the Hanford Site has continued to have its share of problems. Contractors have regularly failed to meet cleanup deadlines, prompting several congressional hearings and legal action by the Washington State Attorney General's Office. In September 2005, 11 pipefitters represented by the [Government Accountability Project](#), which assisted Austin in her initial complaints against Westinghouse, successfully sued the current prime contractor, Fluor Hanford, for firing them after they blew the whistle and refused to install potentially dangerous valves on single-shall tanks.

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VII. Inez Austin's Message to the Public

Looking back at her experience with Westinghouse Hanford, Inez Austin only holds one true regret. "I regret being so naive ... I think the American public needs to realize that very few federal protection policies are actually really followed. It seems if you see no evil, hear no evil, no harm has really been done. But, if you are really ethical, it is hard to have an easy life. I tried to get some protection but there were so many problems with Hanford. ... The sad fact is that there are so many environmental crimes that will affect our families ... everyone will suffer in the long run ... in health, and also the expensive health bills will have to be paid; the environment will be damaged. People will not hold anyone responsible, partly because companies don't have the money to clean up this big mess that could have been prevented."

She is also troubled by what could be best described as a cultural phenomenon: "People have to stop seeing whistleblowers as tattletales. ... I don't know what you do, living in a culture that thinks if you have standards that you're a tattletale."

Still, nearly 10 years after leaving Hanford for good, Inez Austin stands by her efforts to protect the health and safety of the public and her fellow clean-up workers. "I can't see how I could have done anything differently and believe me I have had time to think about it."

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Notes

The Inez Austin pages were originally posted in the OEC in October 1998. They were revised and updated in October 2005.

The information in these pages was drawn from extensive personal communications with Inez Austin, along with the sites and materials that are listed throughout.

** Images courtesy of the Department of Energy (through the assistance of Hanford Watch).*

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