Safe Nuclear Power: Instrumentation, Human Oversight, and Infrastructure Transition

ECE 4900W – Summer 2025

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June 11, 2025

Outline

- Nuclear power plants are designed to be safe and efficient.
- Instrumentation plays a critical role in monitoring and control.
- Human oversight is essential for safe operation.

Motivation

- High energy density and steady base-load power
- Nearly zero emissions, independent of weather
- Risks of failure—catastrophic if unmanaged

The Fission Process

$$^{235}\text{U} +^{1} \text{n} \rightarrow^{92} \text{Kr} +^{141} \text{Ba} + 3^{1}\text{n} + \text{Energy} \approx 200 \text{ MeV} \quad (1)$$

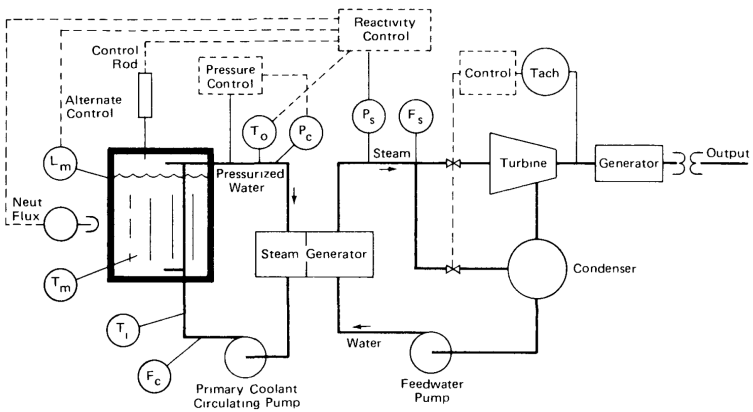
- A neutron collides with uranium-235, causing it to split
- Releases energy and more neutrons $\rightarrow$ possible chain reaction

Reactivity and Control

$$\rho = \frac{k_{\text{eff}} - 1}{k_{\text{eff}}} \tag{2}$$

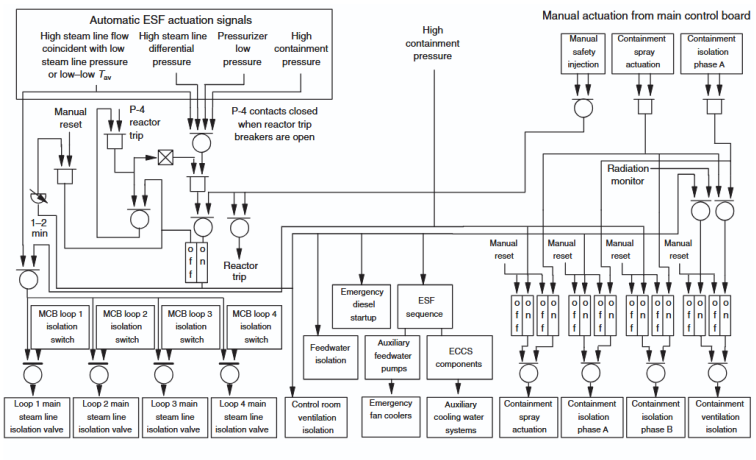
- k_{eff}: effective neutron multiplication factor
- $\rho > 0$: supercritical (power increases)
- $\rho = 0$: critical (steady power)
- $\rho < 0$: subcritical (power decreases)

Types of Reactors and PWR Instrumentation



- Pressurized Water Reactor (PWR)
- Boiling Water Reactor (BWR)
- Heavy Water Reactor (CANDU)
- Advanced Gas-cooled Reactor (AGR)

Automatic Protection Systems



- Reactor protection systems (RPS): monitor reactivity, temperature, pressure
- Logic interlocks: prevent unsafe configurations
- Hardwired paths with digital backups

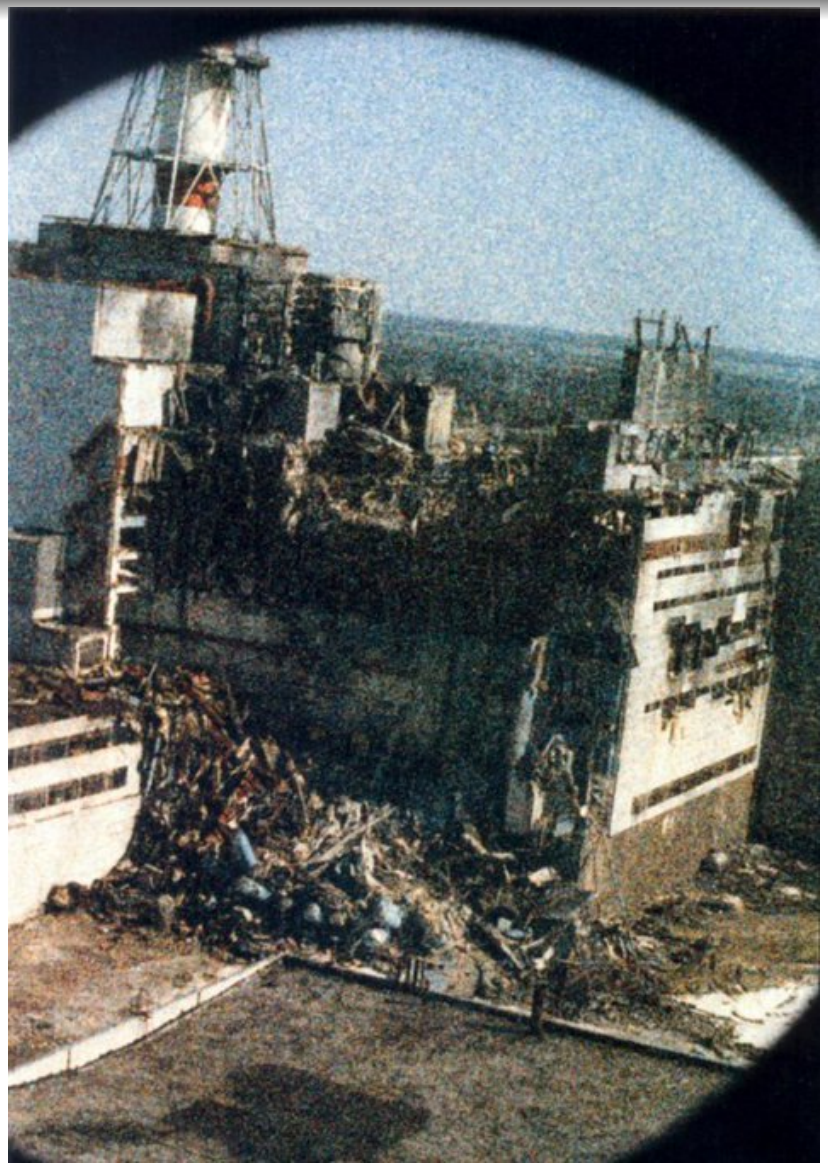
SL-1: Prompt Critical Accident

- Occurred January 3, 1961 in Idaho Falls.
- A single control rod was withdrawn manually beyond safe limits.
- Caused an instantaneous power excursion and steam explosion.
- All three operators died; first fatal U.S. nuclear accident.

Three Mile Island: Partial Core Meltdown

- March 28, 1979 in Pennsylvania.
- Equipment failure: relief valve stuck open.
- Operator misinterpretation led to coolant pump shutdown.
- Reactor overheated—partial meltdown of core.

Chernobyl: Uncontrolled Power Surge



- April 26, 1986 in Pripyat, USSR.
- Unsafe test conducted at low power with flawed RBMK reactor.
- Control rods exacerbated the surge due to graphite tips.
- Reactor exploded; massive radioactive release.

Fukushima Daiichi: Station Blackout

- March 11, 2011 in Japan.
- Magnitude 9.0 earthquake triggered tsunami.
- Backup diesel generators flooded—loss of core cooling.
- Hydrogen buildup led to explosions in three reactors.

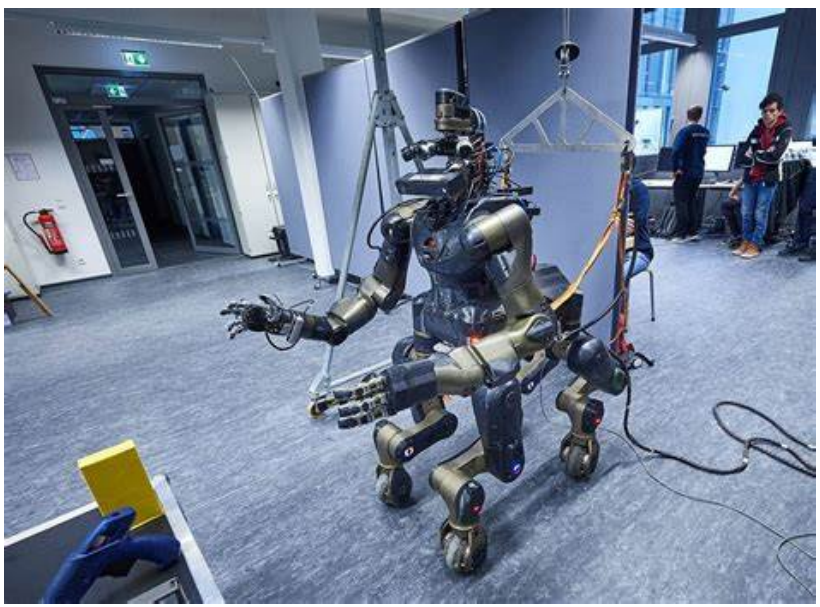
Human Operators: Essential Links

- Operators monitor instrumentation and respond to alarms.
- They must understand system behavior and safety limits.
- Training and vigilance are critical for safe operation.

Human Factors Engineering

- Post-TMI, HFE became a formal discipline in nuclear plant design.
- Goals: reduce confusion, prevent overload, clarify alarms.
- INPO and NRC led redesigns of control interfaces.

Ethical Oversight in Automation



- Systems must support—not replace—human oversight.
- Overreliance on automation can erode accountability.
- Ethical design considers failure modes, transparency, and operator input.

Why Nuclear Declined

- Each accident—from SL-1 to Fukushima—prompted strict new regulations.
- Longer licensing cycles delayed new builds by decades.
- Public opposition and fear, not technical failure, stalled the industry.
- Skilled labor and supply chains diminished as construction halted.

Challenges Today

- Most operating reactors in the U.S. are past mid-life.
- Replacing the aging nuclear workforce is a growing challenge.
- Engineering firms that once supported nuclear have pivoted to renewables.
- Safety margins remain—but the supporting infrastructure has weakened.

Conclusion: A Deliberate Future

- Nuclear power is safe when designed, operated, and overseen with care.
- Instrumentation and human oversight must evolve together.
- Ethical design puts operators in control, not out of the loop.
- The tools are available, what remains is the will to rebuild trust.

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