

Introduction



Before international terrorists used ammonium nitrate in the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, before Osama bin Laden's network ordered the 1998 ammonium nitrate bombing of U.S. embassies, before Timothy McVeigh's 1995 ammonium nitrate bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma . . . there was a far deadlier explosion in a small American city. It was also an ammonium nitrate explosion—but it was three hundred times more powerful than the one unleashed by McVeigh.

It claimed more lives on American soil than any other man-made disaster in the twentieth century. It was the greatest industrial tragedy in the history of the most industrialized country in the world.

On a beautiful spring day in 1947, the hardworking and perfectly American town of Texas City, Texas, almost disappeared from existence. Everyone in the small city was forced to face an endless series of converging, disparate forces.

Thousands of people were killed or wounded, a fire department was erased, planes fell from the sky, oceangoing freighters vanished. The most powerful people of the era—the president, Supreme Court justices, military commanders, Hollywood superstars, FBI directors—were drawn into the plot.

And then the patriotic residents of the small city found themselves

becoming among the first to contemplate something equally impossible—the belief that the blood of American citizens could be found on the hands of their leaders.

The Texas City Disaster, as it came to be known, would have lingering effects for millions of us.

It would set legal standards for determining if our elected officials have been horribly negligent in their duties to protect and serve the American people. It would redefine the entire way federal, state, and local officials respond to the most massive emergencies—including the 9/11 tragedies.

But, in time, many other Americans would cease to remember how the ordinary heroes in Texas City found themselves hurtling toward modern science's deadly miracles—and toward the international schemes of the world's leaders.

No one will ever know how many men, women, and children died in Texas City. Some say six hundred, some say seven hundred or eight hundred—so many simply vanished that no one knows the real count. There were five thousand injured. Over two thousand homeless. Businesses, defense plants, refineries, houses, churches, planes, cars, trains, and huge ships were destroyed. The initial property damage was close to \$4.5 billion. The lingering costs went much higher.

At the heart of the disaster was that once-seemingly magical compound called ammonium nitrate.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the world's brilliant scientists came frantically to the conclusion that the Earth's natural nitrogen cycle would no longer be able to support life on the planet.

Influential chemists raced to their laboratories. They uncorked fabulous experiments with nitrogen, until God's own coda seemed to be playing and startling, life-giving nitrogen compounds could be created in massive proportions.

The Nobel Prize was dutifully awarded to one of those chemists, in grateful recognition that his work had saved mankind—that his compounds could be used to feed millions of starving people.

But it also became quickly clear that the thrilling chemistry had a profound dark side.

Those exact life-saving compounds could also be used to make the

deadliest explosives—ones that could conduct the great wars, destroy office towers, and level cities.

It was a horrific paradox—the chemical miracles could be enduring nightmares.

In time, the world would become addicted to both possibilities:

The United States would use millions of pounds of the nitrogen compounds to bomb its enemies into submission—and it would use billions of pounds of the same compounds to grow crops in vulnerable, strategically important countries around the world.

Some studies show that American farmers now use about 17 billion pounds each year of the nitrate fertilizers. A federal study not long ago concluded that there is no pragmatic way to make ammonium nitrate safer “without seriously affecting its use as a fertilizer.”

It is a cruel irony that the good people of Texas City know better than anyone else in the country.

That irony first began to become clear for me one morning on a day that promised to emerge as beautiful as that one in 1947.

Exactly twenty years ago, I stood in the inky dark on the Texas City waterfront, fishing and waiting for the sun. When dawn finally arrived, it knocked my breath away. As the sun rose, there was the massive silhouette of a rusted ocean-bound freighter—and behind it, endless miles of smoking, towering, dull-gray petrochemical plants.

It was like seeing something ominous rising up out of Texas City’s past.

From that day on, I began years of research into what really happened when Texas City became a city on fire.

More than two hundred people were interviewed for this book. More than thirty thousand pages of trial transcripts, federal inquiries, congressional committee hearings, and reports housed in the United States National Archives were examined. Original police logs, depositions, and deathbed statements were examined. Eyewitnesses who were within yards of the explosion were interviewed for the first time. International maritime experts were consulted. Thousands of pages of out-of-print newspapers, magazines, and medical journals were unearthed. Thousands more pages of FBI documents were ordered under the Freedom of Information Act. The archives of the Catholic Church were consulted.

The same rules used in my biography of President George W. Bush were applied. Exact quotes from transcripts, interviews, previously unpublished material, and depositions are in quotation marks and sometimes italicized for emphasis. Other internal and external dialogue, built from those same sources but not gleaned from firsthand accounts, is italicized but not in quotes. As we did with the biography of President Bush, I worked with my researchers to keep this work as bias-free as possible.

And now, after my years of obsession, one thing still haunts me about what happened that awful day in Texas City. One thing still rises up like that rusted ship did one dawning morning so many years ago:

The stories of ordinary, heroic Americans racing to an apocalypse should never be forgotten.

Bill Minutaglio
Austin, Texas
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City on Fire

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