Safety Topic – The Safety Culture

March 23, 2005:
BP refinery in Texas City, TX was starting isomerization unit

Sequence of events

- The Raffinate Splitter tower was over-filled completely with liquid
- Liquid in the overhead flowed through PSVs to the nearby blowdown drum
- Blowdown drum overflowed
- Liquid hydrocarbon sprayed throughout the area
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The hydrocarbon cloud was ignited by exhaust from an idling truck - the resulting vapor cloud explosion killed 15 and injured 170.
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Investigated by BP, the US Chemical Safety Board, & an independent panel headed by James A. Baker III

The US Chemical Safety Board concluded that the primary cause of the accident was a total breakdown in the safety culture at BP:

- In the previous 30 years, the facility had experienced 23 fatalities – three fatalities in 2004 alone
- Management objective was to maintain production with minimum cost expenditure; critical maintenance was never performed
- Operators routinely ignored written operating procedures during startup
- Instruments were repeatedly reported as malfunctioning, and the resulting work orders were cleared without repairing the instruments
- Temporary trailers were erected near the Isomerization unit without any safety review

1 Former White House Chief of Staff, U.S. Secretary of State, U.S. Secretary of Treasury

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Legal actions

- September 2005: In a settlement agreement, OSHA fines BP record $21.3 million & charges it with 300 health and safety violations

- October 2007: BP agrees to resolve criminal investigation by pleading guilty to a felony violation of the Clean Air Act – $50 million fine, serve three years' probation, & comply with terms of OSHA settlement
  - Blast victims challenge fine as inadequate

- October 2009: OSHA proposes to fine BP $87 million for the alleged settlement violations
  - July 2010: settled 270 allegations & paid $50.6 million & continued to contest $30.7 million of this fine

- July 2012: $13 million fine to settle 409 allegations
  - Was to resolve final $30 by end of 2012

- Ultimately refinery sold to Marathon Petroleum