

Nuclear Dinosaur

By Peter Asmus
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The recent call by President Bush to restart a major nuclear power program in this country in response to concerns about our dependence on foreign energy sources and global climate change would have Adam Smith rolling in his grave.

There is no power source less compatible with the GOP's love of free markets and disdain for regulation and subsidy than nuclear fission. Without government intervention, there simply would be no nuclear industry.

Now, it is true that nuclear energy does not contribute to global climate change. And the new pebble bed modular reactor may well leak less, greatly reduce the risks of catastrophic meltdown and use less uranium fuel. But nuclear power is far from being clean or green. Consider the following:

- In the nuclear fuel process, uranium enrichment depends on great amounts of electricity, most of which is provided by dirty fossil fuel plants releasing all of the traditional air pollution emissions not released by the nuclear reactor itself. Two of the nation's most polluting coal plants, in Ohio and Indiana, produce electricity primarily for uranium enrichment.
- The operations of nuclear power plants release dangerous air emissions in the form of radioactive gases, including carbon-14, iodine-131, krypton and xenon.
- Uranium mining mimics techniques used for coal, and similar issues of toxic contamination of local land and water resources arise -- as does the matter of the unique radioactive contamination hazards to mine workers and nearby populations. Abandoned mines contaminated with high-level radioactive waste can pose radioactive risks for as long as 250,000 years after closure.
- Concerns about chronic or routine exposure to radiation are augmented by the supreme risk of catastrophe in the event of power plant accidents. A major failure in the nuclear power plant's cooling systems, such as the rupture of the reactor vessel, can create a nuclear "meltdown." Catastrophic accidents could easily kill 100,000 people.

I first learned about the electricity industry when I covered the battle to close the Rancho Seco nuclear plant in Sacramento in the 1980s. A long list of problems had resulted in local rate increases exceeding 200 percent. There were rumors of drug use, and even sex orgies, under the immense cooling towers. The picture painted by some insiders was of an operations crew made up of a bunch of yahoos who would fit right into an episode of "The Simpsons."

Over the next 15 years, I learned the ins and outs of the electricity business, the world's largest -- and most polluting -- industrial enterprise. The subject is boring and complex, which has led to ignorance about its extremely important activities. Past decisions authorizing a spate of nuclear plants were made with little scrutiny of their economic or environmental impacts. The consequences of those decisions, and the government subsidies that helped promote the fiction that they were cost-effective, helped set the stage for today's crisis in energy supply.

The United States, with its 103 operating nuclear power plants, is already the world's top consumer of electricity generated from nuclear fission. But we have yet to build a federal repository for nuclear

waste. Given that U.S. reactors produce about 2,000 tons of high-level waste every year of operation, calling for greater reliance on nuclear power is not only supremely irresponsible but also an insult to the "conservative" wing of the Republican Party. Teddy Roosevelt is also turning over in his grave.

That Republicans call for more nuclear power is truly mind-boggling. There has never been a more subsidized, socialized power technology than nuclear. Virtually all of the countries that derive the greatest amount of electricity from nuclear power -- France, Lithuania, Ukraine, Sweden -- feature central planning and socialistic energy policies.

Real, free-market energy policies suggest smaller, smarter and cleaner power sources. The last thing the United States should embark on in these volatile times tainted by the terrorist threat is the dinosaur technology that is nuclear power.

The writer is author of "Reaping the Wind" and "Reinventing Electric Utilities."
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