

## **“THE PUSH TO ‘REVIVE’ NUCLEAR POWER”**

### ***Karl Grossman Presentation at Conference on “The Next Environmental Hurdles”***

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The Bush administration and the nuclear industry are making an intense push to “revive” nuclear power in the United States. Diane D’Arrigo of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service says “relapse” is the better term: “It’s the push to relapse,” she says. As Bob Alvarez, executive director of the group Standing for Truth About Radiation says, “It’s like reviving Frankenstein—this is the sequel.” For years—ever since the accidents at the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl shattered public trust in atomic power—nuclear power advocates in government and industry have been laying the groundwork for a nuclear power comeback in the U.S.

An unbridled drive is now underway. The Bush administration’s stance is aggressive and extreme and minimizes the dangers of nuclear power often in outrageous ways. As Bush’s Secretary of Treasury Paul O’Neill told *The Wall Street Journal*: “If you set aside Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, the safety record of nuclear is really is good.” (Yes, Mrs. Lincoln, apart from that, how did you enjoy the show?)

The Bush administration struck a close working relationship with the nuclear industry well before taking office. The Bush administration’s energy “transition” advisors included Joseph Colvin, president of the Nuclear Energy Institute, the self-described “policy organization of the nuclear energy and technologies industry,” and other nuclear industry biggies. There was no one representing renewable energy or environmental organizations.

Two weeks after being sworn in, he set up a “National Energy Policy Development Group” and appointed Vice President Cheney as its chairman. The group included O’Neill. Behind closed doors, it huddled with fat energy industry cats—indeed, the General Accounting Office is now in the process of pursuing an unprecedented lawsuit because of Cheney’s refusal to disclose who this government panel met with before setting policy. The panel, 10 weeks after being organized, issued its report declaring how it “supports the expansion of nuclear energy in the United States.”

The National Energy Policy plan—now being considered by Congress—would substantially increase the use of nuclear power in the U.S. both by building new nuclear power plants—many to be constructed on existing nuclear plant sites—and extending the 40-year licenses of currently operating plants each by another 20 years.

The National Energy Policy says: “Many U.S. nuclear plants sites were designed to host four to six reactors, and most operate only two or three; many sites across the country could host additional plants.” Further, “Building new generators on existing sites avoids many complex issues associated with building plants on new sites.”

It would also magnify the impacts of an accident for if one nuclear plant in a cluster of plants undergoes a catastrophic accident resulting in a site evacuation and abandonment of control rooms, there is then the potential for a “cascading loss” involving additional plants, stresses Paul Gunter, who heads NIRS’ Reactor Watchdog Project. The National Energy Policy speaks of extending the operating licenses of existing nuclear plants by 20 years—and that’s already being done. “No one foresaw” nuclear plants “running for more than 40 years,” says Alvarez, who was senior policy advisor to the DOE secretary from 1993 to 1999. “These reactors are just like old machines but they are ultra-hazardous,” he says, and by pushing their operating span to 60 years, “disaster is being invited.”

The Bush-Cheney administration National Energy Policy supports purportedly “new and improved” nuclear plants, “advanced” nukes. It says, “Advanced reactor technology promises to improve nuclear safety.” The administration is especially bullish on “the gas-cooled, pebble bed reactor, which has inherent safety features,” it says. In fact, says Gunter, the pebble bed reactor is not new, it’s just “old wine in a new bottle.” It’s a “hybrid” of the gas-cooled high-temperature design that “has appeared and been rejected in England, Germany and the United States.” And far from being “inherently safe,” a reactor of similar design, a THTR300 in the Ruhr Valley in Germany spewed out substantial amounts of radioactivity in a 1986 accident leading to its permanent closure.

The new nuclear push would be pursued through what’s called “one-step” licensing. This was part of an Energy Policy Act bill approved by a Democratic-controlled Congress in 1992, might I note—381 to 37—and signed into law by the first President George Bush.

“One-step” licensing allows the NRC to hold a single hearing for a “combined construction and operating license.” No longer can nuclear plant projects be slowed down or stopped at a separate operating license proceeding at which evidence of construction defects are revealed. As the *New York Times* described passage of the Energy Policy Act in a back-of-the-paper story in 1992, “Nuclear power lobbyists called the bill their biggest victory in Congress since the Three Mile Island

accident.” As NIRS reported in its “Nuclear Monitor” in 1992: “As the bill wound its way through the Senate and House, the nuclear industry won nearly every vote that mattered, proving that Congress remains captive to industry lobbying and political contributions over public opinion.” That has not changed—with a few notable exceptions including Representative Major Owens of New York, scheduled to speak here today, and Representative Edward Markey of Massachusetts. Public Citizen’s Critical Mass Energy and Environment Program has documented how the nuclear industry regularly showers Congress—and this includes members of both major parties—with political contributions. And when the nuclear industry gives, members of Congress listen—and act. Likewise, nuclear industry money pours into presidential campaigns. The Republican Bush-Cheney posture on nuclear power is super-extreme, but that doesn’t mean the Democratic alternative was—or is—on the diametric other “side.” The website of the Nuclear Energy Institute—[www.nei.org](http://www.nei.org)—includes a page of “Endorsements of Nuclear Energy” and among those quoted are Al Gore: “Nuclear power, designed well, regulated properly, cared for meticulously, has a place in the world’s energy supply,” he is reported to have said.

Gore’s running mate as candidate for vice president, Senator Joseph Lieberman, is quoted as saying at a Senate hearing in 1998: “I am a supporter of nuclear energy.”

To make sure the public hardly participates even in the “one-step” process, the NRC is now involved in a “rulemaking” to undo what it through the years interpreted as the public’s right to formal trial-type hearings on nuclear plant licensing. It seeks to “deformalize” the hearings eliminating due process procedures. No longer will people be entitled to documents or to cross-examine witnesses. Documents would be restricted to what the NRC staff and company deem relevant and instead of cross-examining witnesses, people will have to submit written questions as suggestions to the NRC presiding officer for he or she to ask—at their discretion—at a hearing.

Also to help in a nuclear power comeback is the effort to alter the standards for radiation exposure. As more and more has been learned about radioactivity, the realization came that any amount can kill, that there is no “safe” level. This is called the “linear no-threshold theory.” Now nuclear advocates in government and industry want to alter the standards premised on a contention that low doses of radiation are not so bad after all. There is even interest in a long-rejected notion called “hormesis”—that a little radiation is good for people, that it helps exercise the immune system. The instrument for making the changes is a new Biological Effects of Ionizing Radiation (BEIR) panel of the National Academy of Sciences that is to make recommendations to the federal government. It is “stacked,” notes Diane D’Arrigo of NIRS, with “supporters of radiation advocates.”

Nuclear waste is another obstacle the nuclear proponents in government and industry are seeking to get around. The Bush administration is now moving to open Yucca Mountain in Nevada as a repository and also use Utah’s Skull Valley Goshute Reservation and possibly other Native American reservations. For what is considered “low-level” waste, the strategy is to “recycle” it—to smelt metals down and incorporate irradiated material into consumer items.

The huge problem with using Yucca Mountain, which the government began exploring as a high-level nuclear waste repository in the 1980s, is that it is on or near 32 earthquake faults and, notes D’Arrigo, has a “history and prospects of volcanoes and a likelihood of flooding and leakage.” In 1997, tribal leaders of the Goshute Reservation, as the Goshute’s website notes, “leased land to a private group of electrical utilities for the temporary storage of 40,000 metric tons of spent nuclear fuel.” Some members of the tribe are fighting the deal in court demanding to know who got what for what. To nuclear advocates in government and nuclear industry, collaborating with Indian reservations as sovereign nations is a way to unload atomic garbage. Critics describe it as a new form of environmental racism—“nuclear racism”—seeking to take advantage of the poverty of Native Americans.

The drive to “recycle” nuclear waste has been percolating for years. In 1980, the NRC first proposed that irradiated “metal scrap could be converted” that “radioactive waste burial costs could be avoided [and] the resulting use of smelted scrap could be made into any number of consumer or capital equipment products such as automobiles, appliances, furniture, utensils, personal items and coins.” Some thought that the push for radioactive quarters and hot Pontiacs was too crazy to be true. But now the scheme is coming down the pike full-speed. Meanwhile, those behind the nuclear push have moved to extend a key piece of U.S. law that facilitated the nuclear power industry in the first place: the Price-Anderson Act, the law that drastically limits the amount of money people can collect as a result of a nuclear power plant disaster. It was enacted in 1957 after nervous utilities and insurance companies balked at building nuclear power plants—to be a temporary measure to give a boost to setting up a nuclear power industry, it originally limited in the event of a nuclear plant accident to \$560 million with the federal government paying the first \$500 million. Price-Anderson has been extended and extended, and now it’s being extended once more—to provide a financial umbrella for the push to revive nuclear power.

As Michael Mariotte has pointed out: “The renewal of Price-Anderson is only to build new reactors. That’s the issue. Existing nuclear plants are covered by the present law.”

The new Price-Anderson liability limit would be \$8.6 billion, a fraction of what the NRC itself has concluded would be the financial consequences of a nuclear plant accident. Those figures are contained in a 1982 report done for the NRC by the DOE’s Sandia National Laboratories and titled “Calculation of Reactor Accident Consequences for U.S. Nuclear Power Plants.” It calculates—in 1980 dollars—costs as a result of a nuclear plant disaster as high as \$274 billion for Indian Point 2 and \$314 billion at the Indian Point 3 nuclear plants both a little more than 40 north of where we are today. The number of “early fatalities”—46,000 as a result of Indian Point 2 undergoing a meltdown with breach of containment, 50,000 for Indian Point 3.

And what are the chances of such a disaster occurring? In 1985, the NRC was asked by a House oversight committee chaired by Representative Markey to determine the “probability” of a “severe core melt accident” in the “next twenty years for those reactors now operating and those expected to operate during that time.” The NRC concluded: “The crude cumulative probability of such an accident would be 45 percent.” That disaster has not come...yet. “Luck” is the only reason it hasn’t, says David Lochbaum of the Union of Concerned Scientists. But the drive to revive nuclear power, the push to relapse, will, if it succeeds, help make inevitable that catastrophe—along with extending the damage of every aspect of the nuclear power chain, from mining to milling to transportation to fuel enrichment and fabrication to reactor operation and the “routine” emissions of radioactivity from that and then atomic waste management in perpetuity.

And, new—but not really new—is the specter of nuclear plants as terrorist targets. In 1980, a landmark book by Bennett Ramberg was published, “Nuclear Power Plants as Weapons for the Enemy: An Unrecognized Military Peril” was its title. Despite the “multiplication of nuclear power plants,” it begins, “little public consideration has been given to their vulnerability in time of war...The failure or unwillingness of policy makers in the United States and abroad to make this matter a subject for extensive public review and debate is unfortunate.” Unfortunate—and in the wake of September 11—potentially lethal. Dr. Ramberg, now research director of the Los Angeles-based Committee to Bridge the Gap, said in a post 9/11 presentation at the National Press Club: “I presented my findings to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission raising questions about the vulnerability of American reactors to terrorist action. The commission dismissed my concerns.” Indeed, in a “rule-making” in 1982, an Atomic Safety and Licensing Board of the NRC, in considering an operating license for the Shearon Harris nuclear power plant in North Carolina, dismissed a contention by an intervenor, Wells Eddleman, that the plant’s safety analysis was deficient because it did not consider the “consequences of terrorists commandeering a very large airplane...and diving it into the containment.” The NRC board declared: “Reactors could not be effectively protected against such attacks without turning them into virtually impregnable fortresses at much higher cost...The applicants are not required to design against such things as artillery bombardments, missiles with nuclear warheads, or kamikaze dives by large airplanes.” Meanwhile, new since 1982 is the full arrival of safe, clean, renewable energy technologies. The need is for broad-scale implementation. Wind power, solar energy, hydrogen fuel technologies including fuel cells, among other renewable energy technologies, are more than ready after years of dramatic advances. Coupled with energy efficiency, they can be tapped and widely utilized—and render nuclear power completely unnecessary. As NIRS, Public Citizen’s Critical Mass Energy and Environment Program, Greenpeace USA, Safe Energy Communication Council, the Global Resource Action Center for the Environment, said of the National Energy Policy:

“The Bush/Cheney administration is recklessly promoting the building of new nuclear plants to address an energy crisis that in large part is being manufactured by the energy corporations that will benefit from building new power plants....The combination of demand reduction and increased usage of renewables would be enough to replace nuclear power....We believe that instead of promoting dangerous and dirty forms of energy, the United States should be a world leader in promoting renewable energy and energy efficiency. Let us not sell our children’s future.”

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He has long been active in television as well as print journalism and is the host of documentaries and interview shows for New York-based EnviroVideo <[www.envirovideo.com](http://www.envirovideo.com)> including many on nuclear power. Starting this spring Grossman’s EnviroVideo programs will be broadcast weekly through the U.S. on Free Speech TV airing on cable and public TV and satellite systems. He has given presentations on nuclear power across the United States and abroad.

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