

Energy Insider by William Engdahl

What about nuclear energy?

A look at the Carter administration's policy record and the results for the nation.

Since 1976, has Washington succeeded in killing our most efficient, least costly, and still safest energy resource—nuclear power generation? Energy is clearly becoming a national and local election year issue in both congressional and presidential races. It's a useful time to review federal policy decisions over the past three and a half years.

James Earl Carter is the first President since the dawn of the peaceful nuclear energy age in the early 1950s to make opposition to continued development of nuclear power a central feature of administration policy. One of his first major policy declarations after taking office in 1977 was to declare his full endorsement of the conclusions of a Ford Foundation study, "Nuclear Power: Issues and Choices," written by his Deputy Energy Secretary, John Sawhill.

Carter then secured passage of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act of 1978, commonly referred to as the Nuclear Export Act. As a predictable result of the stringent export restrictions of this bill, the United States, which only a few years ago exported 90 percent of the world's nuclear equipment, has had to all but abandon its export of nuclear plants. No country is willing to stake its energy future on what is rightly regarded as an "unreliable supplier." The recent fight over shipment of uranium fuel to India's Tarapur reactor is a case in point. In the wake of last week's

House vote under the act to halt fuel deliveries for India's nuclear reactor, Indian business circles were discussing withdrawal from International Atomic Energy Agency safeguard stipulations and development of the very reprocessing technology the U.S. law ostensibly was designed to stop.

Indeed, the very heart of the IAEA international safeguard process underlying the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) is itself rapidly becoming a dead letter because of the uncertainties introduced by recent U.S. legislation. At the Second Review of NPT meeting in Geneva last month, several developing-sector nations almost walked out in protest against the Carter administration policy. One diplomat noted that "NPT has passed its peak. . . . If they call another conference, it will be worse than this one."

With nuclear exports all but cut off through such policies in the last three years, the domestic industry was softened up for the political assault that followed in the wake of the Three Mile Island incident. George Cunningham, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Energy for Nuclear Energy, stated recently that "There is not an awful lot you can do to keep a factory in business when there's no demand for its product." Such a statement from a responsible official would have been unthinkable several years ago. The DOE Office of Policy &

Evaluation will soon announce latest estimates for installed nuclear capacity by the year 2000. 150 gigawatts is now their "best estimate." Less than a year ago, an international review panel projected 255-395 gigawatts. Even that is paltry compared to the Nixon administration target of 1,000 GW by 2000. For reference, one nuclear plant with a typical 1 GW capacity provides enough electricity for a city of approximately 1 million and saves the equivalent of 10 million barrels of oil per year.

And months after the dust settled from Three Mile Island, it is clear that aside from "psychological" damage to pregnant housewives brought about by irresponsible media, the primary damage from endless environmentalist obstructions to an orderly cleanup could be to bankrupt the Metropolitan Edison utility. Regulatory decision, or lack of it, has prevented restart of the second unit, TMI-1, despite the fact that it was unaffected by the incident.

Meanwhile, the Soviets have been operating a 600 megawatt fast breeder near Beloyarsk since April. The French, who have had a demonstration breeder operating for several years, are well into their commercial-scale Super-Phénix construction. France, West Germany, Canada and the Soviets are grabbing up the lucrative international reactor supply, engineering, and construction market left by the collapse of America's export capability. It's food for thought as election time nears. People like John Sawhill, Carter's nominee to chair the new Synfuels Corporation, may be smiling; the rest of us cannot afford to until these priorities are reversed.