

Speaking Out

When I attend American Nuclear Society meetings, I generally cover sessions sponsored by the Fuel Cycle and Waste Management Division or the Decommissioning, Decontamination and Reutilization Division. So I go to the plenary sessions to gain a broader appreciation of the nuclear industry in general, not just the waste and D&D segments. But I also go to the plenaries to get my batteries recharged—to be inspired, so to speak, by the keynote speakers these sessions often feature—to keep up my enthusiasm for the industry and for my job.

The plenary session at the 2002 ANS Winter Meeting, held November 17–21 in Washington, D.C., was full of good information-gathering moments. From “dirty bombs” to clean electricity, from the ocean floor to the planet Pluto, the wide world of nuclear energy applications was opened up to meeting attendees.

As for battery-charging, you can't ask for a better power source than John Sununu, former governor of New Hampshire, chief of staff for the first President Bush, and father of newly elected *Senator* John Sununu from New Hampshire. An engineer who went into politics to “save the world from lawyers,” Sununu spoke on the new opportunities for nuclear energy in today's political climate, and the new responsibilities that stem from those opportunities.

Perhaps because Sununu is a politician, or at least a former politician, it should not have been a surprise to hear him defend the species. And since he is also an engineer, it should not have been a surprise for him to note a major failing of nuclear industry representatives: an antipathy to joining the public debate. “If the [nuclear] professionals will not stand up in a public

arena, then we have no right to criticize nontechnical politicians who do the same thing,” he stated.

The fault is not the politicians', he continued. Rather, it is the fault of the people working in the industry. “We don't create the climate in which the *right* decision is the *easy* decision, not the *hard* decision.” Things will not change, he continued, until the industry accepts “the discomfort of joining the political debate.”

Earlier in the year, the industry failed to take advantage of the public's willingness to listen to the technical arguments on the Yucca Mountain issue, Sununu said. Today, however, he noted, there is a “clean sheet” to write on. The opportunity is there. But, he cautioned, the industry members need to *educate themselves* about how to speak to the public, and then use that skill to *educate the public*.

Remember, he cautioned, final decisions will be made by people who have no feeling for the difference between parts per million and parts per billion. Therefore, arguments must be framed in words that the public can comprehend, he said.

Meeting attendees appeared receptive to the challenge—for the moment, at least. ANS Vice President/President-Elect Larry Foulke stood up and mentioned that he has an 18-month bully pulpit for speaking out on nuclear issues. “How should I go about learning *how* to do it?” he asked. Responded Sununu: “If you can find 20 of your colleagues willing to join you, I will *personally* come and show you how.”

Will Dr. Foulke find 20 willing colleagues? Can a society full of shy, mild-mannered nuclear engineers learn how to enter the public debate more effectively? Can people with a



Standing Up in the Political Arena

vocabulary of acronyms and the thought processes of engineers effectively engage a mostly nontechnical—and, since 9/11, a fearful—public?

If there is going to be a next generation of nuclear power plants in this country, and if there are going to be continued efforts to clean up the nation's nuclear waste legacy, the answer is, They must! Are you ready for the challenge?—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor