

Comments on this issue ▼

Yucca Mountain, Politicians, and the Non-Persistence of Memory

Now that we are in a presidential election year again in the United States, it's interesting to look at the statements made by our politicians as they chase the votes of average citizens. Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama (Ill.) is on record as opposing the Yucca Mountain high-level waste repository, and he says he will shut the program down once he takes office (thus, I presume, saving the country from the evil designs of the U.S. Department of Energy). The Republican candidate, Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), is supportive of the repository program, although he too appeared to back away from the project a little during a campaign stop in Nevada (where state officials oppose the repository), saying that he also favors fuel reprocessing, and fuel reprocessing might eliminate the need for a Yucca Mountain repository. (No, Sen. McCain, reprocessing does *not* eliminate the need for a repository; it merely changes the shape and content of the waste that ultimately will go into the repository.)

What strikes me about all this is that our politicians appear to be act-

ing as if Yucca Mountain is something that the DOE foisted on the nation. The truth is the polar opposite of that.

Yucca Mountain is the brainchild of *Congress*—that is, the politicians themselves—not a federal agency. In late 1982, Congress (at that time consisting of a Republican Senate and a Democratic House) passed a bipartisan bill called the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982. This bill is the grandfather, you might say, of the Yucca Mountain project. It mandated that the DOE conduct characterization studies of several places around the country where an HLW/spent fuel repository might be sited. One of those places was Yucca Mountain, on the Nevada Test Site in Nevada. Other sites were in the states of Texas and Washington.

Several years later, another bipartisan Congress passed the Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act, which said that in the interest of saving money, the DOE should continue its characterization work only on the Yucca Mountain site. (There was quite a bit of maneuvering from Texas and Washington politicians, who held positions of power in Congress at that time, in pushing this bill through—which is why the state of Nevada has always referred to it as the “Screw Nevada” bill.) This bill is certainly the father of the Yucca Mountain repository.

So, how do politicians get away with conveniently forgetting that it was their counterparts in earlier Congresses that created the Yucca Mountain repository, not the DOE? Why isn't there someone who will tell them that Yucca Mountain is *their* brainchild, not the DOE's? Instead, the DOE gets put in the bad-guy role, and the politicians put themselves forward as the cavalry riding to the rescue.

The broader question is, how do you reconcile the need to create a waste repository in a timely fashion



*Congress,
not the DOE,
is the Creator
of the Yucca
Mountain
Project*

(while the generation of politicians who mandated it are still in office), while at the same time doing the exhaustive characterization and safety studies that can take a decade or more? A still broader question might be, how do you build *any* controversial yet necessary facility in today's political environment, when Congress's non-persistent memory extends, oh, maybe to last week, but maybe not even that long.

I don't have the answers. I just have the questions.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor

High-Level Waste Is Topic of ANS Journal

The July 2008 issue of *Nuclear Technology* is dedicated to the topic of high-level waste. View the abstracts and table of contents of this issue, as well as those of the July issues of *Nuclear Science and Engineering* and *Fusion Science & Technology*, at <http://www.ans.org/goto/nad.cgi?id=1215666000-6>.

For access to full text, as well as archived papers from 1998 to the present, members can subscribe at reduced rates by calling Member Services at 708/579-8266 or online at <http://www.ans.org/goto/nad.cgi?id=1215666000-7>.