

## What If?

One of the many interesting books on my book shelves is titled *What If?* In it, several historians look at what might have happened if the outcomes of major military events, from the Bronze Age Persian wars to the modern era (World War II and the Cold War) had been different. What if the Spanish Armada had defeated England in 1588? What if the South had won the U.S. Civil War? What if Germany had won World War II?

I thought of this book as I was writing my article on Yucca Mountain for this issue (see "Yucca Mountain: Dumped and Wasted?" this issue, page 12). What if, I thought, the original Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982 had been allowed to proceed along as intended? As noted in the article, the NWPA was a remarkably evenhanded piece of legislation, balancing East and West, commercial and defense waste, various disposal media, and did it in a way that led to its bipartisan passage. What if it could have continued on that bipartisan path? Would we be in the same situation that we are in today?

Alas, however, that was not to be. First it was money that became a stumbling block. The NWPA mandated that the DOE study several sites, then choose three of the sites for characterization. But when it became clear, several years later, that characterizing those three sites was going to cost a lot of money, Congress backed down. Looking for a solution, Congress allowed politics to decide what to do next. (Two of the proposed sites for characterization were in states that happened to have a very powerful congressman in office. The third site, in relatively powerless Nevada, was therefore chosen for characterization, and the other sites were pulled from the project.) What if, in 1987, instead of amending the NWPA to al-

low characterization of only one site, Congress had somehow had the courage to vote to continue characterizing all three designated sites, whatever the cost, whatever the political shenanigans? Instead, however, science was completely co-opted by political considerations.

It is a truth universally acknowledged—or at least it should be—that a project that comes to life via politics often dies via politics. Should we be so surprised, some 20 years later, that things have turned around politically? "Relatively powerless" Nevada is now home to the Senate's majority leader. Who knew? Should we be surprised that this person has used all the power of his political office to overturn a decision that was politically motivated in the first place? Can we, with a straight face, accuse him of being unwilling to let science make the final decision when science had no role in the decision in the first place?

So, now, we are back to where we were before the NWPA—we are a nation with a lot of commercial spent nuclear fuel and defense high-level waste that needs a final disposal site, and we have no prospects of having that disposal site for many years to come. Optimists will think it will be decades before a new solution is in place; realists might think more in terms of centuries.

And in the meantime, we have a \$10-billion hole in the ground in Nevada. What to do with it? Well, the editorial cartoonist of my local newspaper, *The Oregonian*, has an idea. In a recent cartoon, he showed the "gate" of Yucca Mountain (complete with security fencing and razor wire) and a delivery truck parked next to it. The delivery truck is labeled "Gitmo" (short for "Guantanamo Bay," where the United States is holding enemy combatants from the Afghan



*A project  
that lives  
because of  
politics  
can also die  
because of  
politics*

war), and the driver is telling the man standing at the gate: "Sign here for some prisoners?"

Well, that's probably not a realistic option for Yucca Mountain. (It is a cartoon, after all.) But right now, I can't think of anything else to do with the site, even though I do really hate large holes in the ground into which we just throw money.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor