

## On Nuclear Waste, the DOE, and 1984 (the Novel, not the Year)

It's been a long time since I read George Orwell's futuristic novel, *1984*. It had to be while I was in high school, and I left that venerable institution in 1964. But I vaguely remember that there were three major political entities in Orwell's world: Oceania (England and the United States), Eurasia (Europe and Russia, primarily), and Eastasia (basically, China). (The vast regions of the Middle East, the Asian subcontinent, Africa, the South Pacific, and South America didn't much interest Orwell, I guess, or else they were considered properties of the "big three.")

Anyhow, to get back to *1984*, at the beginning of the novel, I believe Oceania was at war with Eurasia, and the people were told: "We are at war with Eurasia; we have *always* been at war with Eurasia." At the end of the novel, however, something has changed, and suddenly Oceania is at war with Eastasia, and again, the people are told: "We are at war with Eastasia; we have *always* been at war with Eastasia." In other words, history is what the leaders tell us it is, and no alternate history is allowed, regardless of those silly things called facts.

So, why am I thinking about a novel written in 1948 about a time that never happened? Well, it's just that I was reading the Government Accountability Office's recent report on the closing down of the Yucca Mountain project (see "Headlines," this issue, page 13), and I saw a parallel between Orwell's world and the Obama Administration's Department of Energy. Prior to January 2009, the DOE mantra might have been: "We support the Yucca Mountain project; we have *always* supported the Yucca Mountain project." But almost immediately after the Obama swearing in, it seemed as if the mantra had become: "We do not support the Yucca Mountain project; we have *never* supported the Yucca Mountain project."

Am I exaggerating? Perhaps a tad. But in the GAO report, we read of a government department so dedicated to shutting down a project quickly that it took many liberties with federal policy and guidance on program shutdown. Staff were shoved out the door, and equipment was declared excess and trucked away or was declared abandoned. According to the GAO, "Several DOE officials told us that they had never seen such a large program with so much pressure to close down so quickly." As for the \$15 billion spent on the project? Well, when a country is trillions of dollars in debt, suddenly \$15 billion doesn't seem like so much after all.

Lest the above comments stimulate some caustic response from DOE staffers, let me be quick to assert that I'm not blaming the DOE. Really. I'm not blaming DOE Secretary Steven Chu, and I'm certainly not blaming staffers at the erstwhile Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management. Rather, I'm pointing out an obvious flaw in the management of a long-term project such as waste repository development and operation. On a project that's going to take decades to complete, it is suicide to assign leadership to an entity that can change leaders and direction with each election cycle.

That's why the GAO and other organizations (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Areva, as well as subcommittees of the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Fuel) that have released studies reported on in this issue (see "Headlines," this issue, pp. 12, 15, and 18) call for the formation of an outside entity, perhaps a Federal Corporation, or FedCorp, to manage any future repository projects. Such an entity would, supposedly, be above mere politics and would focus instead on getting its job done. Political winds and sea changes would blow right past the FedCorp, theoretically



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at least, leaving steadfast leadership to oversee staff and studies. Funding would be secured and would not depend on the whims or hostility of Congress.

What's the alternative? Someone once said that a good definition of insanity is doing the same thing over again, expecting different results. Creating a new repository program, but putting the DOE, or any other government agency, in charge of it again, would certainly qualify as insane. We have a whole lot of examples of how *not* to do a repository program. It would be nice to find a path toward doing it right.—Nancy J. Zacha