

# The New Kid on the Block

As I write this, the Christmas lights have all been taken down (here in the Pacific Northwest, we weren't supposed to light them anyway), California is grappling with its never-ending electricity crisis, the new president is about to take office, and a new energy secretary, former Michigan Sen. Spencer Abraham, is preparing for confirmation hearings.

I'm familiar with the old maxim, "If you want a job done right, give it to a busy person." But I don't think there is any old proverb saying, "If you want a job done right, give it to a person who doesn't think it's necessary." Alarming, such is the situation with Sen. Abraham, who is, we are told, one of only a handful of people in the last Congress to introduce legislation to abolish the U.S. Department of Energy.

We are also told that Sen. Abraham has not been terribly visible on DOE issues. Oh, we know he cosponsored and voted in favor of last year's Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act (which President Clinton vetoed), and since he comes from the state of Michigan, he has interests in the automobile industry (and thus in oil and gasoline). And we know he supports oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, a project near and dear to both the new president and his vice president. But we don't know anything at all about Abraham's views on electricity deregulation (and its disastrous consequences in California), on the growing power shortage, on nuclear waste and facility cleanup—just a few of the big issues on the energy secretary's plate.

What we *do* know about Sen. Abraham is that he has solid Republican credentials. He served as chairman of the Michigan Republican Party from 1982 to 1990. In 1990 and 1991, he served as deputy chief of staff for Vice President Quayle. In 1991 and 1992, he was cochairman of the National Republican Congressional

Committee. And he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1994 but was defeated in his recent reelection bid. Given his Michigan background, he was first considered for secretary of transportation, but when that post went to current Commerce Secretary Norman Mineta, Abraham was tapped for Energy instead.

This will not be the first time a person with little knowledge of energy finds him- or herself heading the DOE (remember the South Carolina dentist in the early Reagan years?). Nor, unfortunately, will it be the last time. Despite its Cabinet position, Energy, like Rodney Dangerfield, "don't get no respect," or so it seems. Regardless of its many-billion-dollar budget, complex political issues, and even more complex technical issues, Energy seems permanently relegated to the back benches of political power and position.

Abraham's Senate colleagues are supporting his nomination. The Senate's two top energy advocates, Frank Murkowski (R., Alaska) and Pete Domenici (R., N.M.), both endorse Abraham (but then, they are good Republicans, too). The new secretary will probably get some education on the issues from career DOE subordinates. And, one must admit, he already is very familiar with the ins and outs of working with Congress. In the long term, he may become a strong energy advocate on the Hill and in the White House and a powerful supporter of the Energy agenda.

In the near term, however, it appears that some of the nation's most pressing energy issues—including the aforementioned electricity crisis, spent-fuel storage (a Yucca Mountain recommendation is due this year), DOE site cleanup, and possible new nuclear generation plant construction—will lack a strong and knowledgeable leader to facilitate, much less advocate, the acceptable and workable solutions that the nation's citizens deserve. —Nancy J. Zacha, Editor ■



*Thoughts on  
the Incoming  
Secretary  
of Energy*