

# Heavy Subject, Light Touch

Sometimes you just get lucky. One night some time ago, when I was supposed to be sleeping but was lying awake instead, I came up with a wonderful topic for this issue's editorial. Unfortunately, I fell back asleep before I wrote it down, and when I woke up the next morning, I remembered only that it had been a wonderful topic. Efforts to recapture the memory have proven futile.

But, just as I resigned myself to running a blank page on this spot, rescue came in the form of a book that arrived (completely unsolicited) in the mail: *Waste Is a Terrible Thing to Mind: Risk, Radiation, and Distrust of Government*. The author is John Weingart, who from 1994 to 1998 served as the head of the New Jersey Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Facility Siting Board. His job: to find a volunteer community within the state to host a disposal facility for low-level radioactive waste.

This is a wonderful book. Even though we know the end of the story (the Board failed in the effort, and New Jersey and Connecticut eventually teamed up with South Carolina to form the Atlantic Low-Level Radioactive Waste Compact, thus ensuring New Jersey continued access to the Barnwell, S.C., LLW disposal site), the book makes for fascinating reading. Weingart evidently was quite sincere in his effort to find a volunteer community, and his optimism for eventual success is evident. As a bonus, Weingart (now associate director of Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics) is a good writer, which makes reading this book a pleasure.

The one aspect of Weingart's personality that shines most brightly throughout the book is his sense of humor. Humor, like optimism, can be beaten down by unending negative

results, but to his credit, Weingart's humor remains intact.

One of my favorite parts of the book outlines the Siting Board staffers' attempts to create a better name for themselves. New Jersey Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Facility Siting Board did not flow trippingly off the tongue, and the acronym, NJLLRWDFSB, was neither memorable nor pronounceable (though it did appear on staff teeshirts one year). With an opposition group called CHORD (Citizens Helping to Oppose Radioactive Dumps), the Board staffers felt they needed a simpler, more memorable name. So, over the years, they spent, as Weingart puts it, "the odd moments trying to devise better names or acronyms."

Some of the results: CART (Center for Advanced Radioactive Treatment), rejected because they were planning to do no treatment. Other similar names: CARE and CARP (replace "Treatment" with "Entombment" or "Placement").

Then, less seriously, there was PRIEST (Permanent Repository for Isotopes in an Engineered Safe Terminus), CREPE (Center for Radioactive Element Placement for Eternity), CUMIN (Center for the Use and Management of Innocuous Nuclides), GARLIC (Government Agency Responsible for Long-term Isotope Cloistering), OREGANO (Organization Responsible for the Effective Generation of Alternative Nuclear Options), SHALLOT (Society for Hospitable Actions toward Low-Level Organic Trash), and SOUFFLE (Society of Optimal Understanding of our Fission and Fusion Legacy to the Environment).

This book is more than just light humor, however. It provides not only a detailed retelling of the Siting Board's many futile attempts at facility siting,



*It Only Hurts  
When I Laugh*

but also the author's analysis of such topics as the lack of political leadership and the current climate of fear and distrust of government. An excerpt from the final chapter, "Making Government Work in a NIMBY Age," appears in this issue on page 22. Disturbingly, Weingart concludes that refusing to provide leadership can be a political plus for government leaders.

This book is must reading for anyone working in the low-level waste arena in the United States. It will amuse you, educate you, and, most of all, disturb you. For more information, contact the publisher, the Center for Analysis of Public Issues, at 609/924-9750, or at [www.njreporter.org](http://www.njreporter.org). The book is also listed at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor