

Still Hopeful, After All These Years

It's been a great couple of months to be in the nuclear industry, hasn't it. I mean, after about 25 years of being battered, bashed, and broiled for having the temerity to be working in such a suspect field, now we are seen once more as the means to an energy-rich future. No longer are we afraid to tell our fellow airline passengers what we do for a living, no longer must we keep our work a secret from the in-laws. Instead we can be proud of our jobs and our professions, now that our winter of discontent has been made glorious summer by this son of Bush (not to mention his vice president).

It all started quietly, so quietly that we almost didn't hear it, or if we did hear it, we didn't believe it. Didn't the vice president just say something nice about nuclear? Oh, we must have heard it wrong. But no, we heard it right! Oh well, it was just a temporary aberration. A trial balloon. He won't ever say it again. But then came some more electricity blackouts in California. And, once again, there it was. And again. The "n" word. Nuclear. Nuclear energy. Nuclear power. Nuclear power plants.

Then the media got in on it. Little articles here and there about nuclear energy, at first very general, then a little more specific. Praising (praising!) the improvements the nation's nuclear plants have made in capacity factors over the last decade. Talking about the absence of greenhouse gas emissions from nuclear plants. Talking about a next generation of nuclear plants. The advanced light water reactors. The pebble bed. Fail-safe designs. Reprocessing, for heaven's sake. ANS President Jim Lake appeared on CNBC and wrote an article for the *Washington Post*. Even National Public Radio got in on the act and allowed a representative from the Nuclear Energy Institute almost as much air time as the gentleman from the Union of

Concerned Scientists. Even some Democrats, much to our amazement, are saying good things about nuclear. (Good thing, too, considering that they are now in the majority in the U.S. Senate.)

Of course, the readers of this magazine, while they may be enjoying the reflected glow of the spotlight on nuclear power, are more concerned about the other end of the energy cycle, the waste. Here, the news isn't quite as rosy, at least not yet. The U.S. Department of Energy has lowered the cleanup budgets for many of its cleanup sites, putting some contracts in jeopardy, renegeing on some state agreements, and, in the end, most assuredly slowing down the pace of cleanup. On the other hand, President Bush has asked the DOE and the Environmental Protection Agency "to use the best science to move expeditiously to find a safe and permanent repository for nuclear waste." With a repository available, the high-level waste at DOE cleanup sites will have a home to go to, perhaps giving new energy and impetus to the cleanup efforts.

New nuclear power plants, and current nuclear power plants operating for additional license terms, will result in more spent nuclear fuel. More spent nuclear fuel means more pressure on the nation's leaders to address the issue of disposal of that fuel (or reprocessing of that fuel, for that matter). The issue will no longer be something politicians approach gingerly, with their fingers holding their noses. It will, instead, be an issue that must be addressed as part of the long-range energy plan, to keep us from the "darker future" President Bush has warned about.

For years, communications experts told us that for the public to support nuclear energy, it had to perceive a need for nuclear energy. Now that need has reappeared on the horizon.



Analyzing the Good News

On the same token, for the public to support their leaders' work to find political solutions to the nuclear waste issue, they have to perceive that the waste was generated in the first place in response to a need. If political leaders think that the public—that is, their constituents, the voters—want them to support efforts to build new nuclear power plants and to support efforts to dispose of nuclear waste generated by those new plants, they—the politicians—will do so. And with the lights going out in California and threatening to go out in other parts of the country, the voters now have every reason to tell their leaders to deal with the issue, solve the problem, and keep the turbines rolling.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor