

Letters

We welcome letters from readers, particularly commentaries that reflect upon or take issue with material we have published. The writer's name, affiliation, address, and telephone number should be included. Because of space limitations, letters are subject to abridgment.

Nuclear Opinion

TO THE EDITOR:

Robert L. Cohen and S. Robert Lichter ("Nuclear Power: The Decision Makers Speak," *Regulation*, March/April 1983) profess surprise at the news that Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials and other decision makers harbor pro-nuclear sentiments. But why should they find this so shocking? The position of the anti-nuclear movement, as I understand it, is that the NRC, and before it the Atomic Energy Commission, has always been pro-nuclear. Appointments to these commissions have been based on politics, not just scientific know-how as the authors imply.

Some details of the survey results deserve comment. According to the authors, 94 percent of industry respondents are "very confident we can solve problems" associated with nuclear power, while none of the activists holds this view. The industry has been just as confident about problem solving for the past thirty years, while the problems have gotten worse. Maybe that is why the activists are not optimistic. As for the question of whether U.S. energy needs are bound to increase in coming years, industry respondents vote their own ticket (all of them agreeing) while activists split theirs (50 percent agreeing). Considering that energy consumption actually decreased last year and that the efficiency of energy use is clearly improving, the activists' mixed opinions hardly seem unreasonable. Obviously consumption cannot go on increasing forever.

When the authors turn to specific safety problems, they again condemn the anti-nuclear activists simply for not being pro-nuclear. It seems the "antis" are concerned not just with waste disposal and proliferation, which many pro-nuclear respondents acknowledged as serious problems, but also with the release of radioactivity into the environment, which the "pros" do not think is a serious problem. To the authors, this indicates that the antis will irrationally clutch at any straw to question the safety of nuclear power.

It is just as easy to ask why the pros care so little about the impoverished Indians who mine uranium, or the people who live in houses built on uranium tailings, who drink from streams contaminated by tailings, and whose cattle graze and drink on radioactive ground. These people, like those who live downwind from atomic tests, suffer abnormal rates of leukemia. The activists are not being irrational when they oppose adding more radiation to the air, water, and soil. The authors contrast "environmental" considerations with "scientific" ones. But environmental concerns *are* scientific concerns; they are not issues of mere sentiment, but matters of cold, hard fact.

Finally, Cohen and Lichter ask us to defer to the "experts," among whom they include the financiers and industrialists who are up to their hip pockets in nuclear investments and the political appointees of pro-nuclear administrations. I would like to suggest instead that it is the anti-nuclear activists, the so-called vocal minority, who are the true experts. The antis that Cohen and Lichter surveyed have studied the nuclear power issue as much as anyone. They have weighed the chances involved; and they—and I—are just as willing to "vote with our feet," by refusing to live near nuclear plants, as are any of the pros.

More fundamentally, I would object to rule by experts even if my group had all the experts. It was

the experts who decided to develop atomic energy and the bomb without consulting the public—sacrificing the democratic process to the interests of national security and "progress."

Ordinary people with a family and a job, who contribute to the tax base and who work on behalf of the public interest, should be just as welcome in the public policy debate as the "expert" whose financial or political well-being is at stake. After all, they are the ones who suffer most from the actions of the businessmen, financiers, and bureaucrats.

Dennis Fritzingler,
University of California
at Berkeley

ROBERT COHEN and S. ROBERT LICHTER respond:

Fritzingler makes two fundamental errors. First, he claims that we interviewed "experts" because we believe they alone *should* determine nuclear policy. In fact we interviewed decision makers, including anti-nuclear activists, because they *are* influencing nuclear policy. "Outside experts" were one of seven categories of people we interviewed. We defined them as independent scientists and social scientists who work and write on nuclear energy.

Second, he seems to believe we are advocating views when we are simply reporting them. Far from characterizing anti-nuclear activists as "irrational," we specifically state that their outlook does *not* reflect irrational sentiments, but simply a different perspective from that of other decision makers. Far from "condemning" them, we write that "the antis have done a remarkable job of combating the combined forces of a powerful industry, sympathetic regulators, and even outside experts. . . ." In short, Fritzingler dislikes our message that most decision makers disagree with the "antis," and his response is to blame the messengers.

On the other hand, several of his own arguments are based less on facts than on false or at least unproven assumptions. The regulators we interviewed in 1980 were career civil servants and Carter administration appointees, hardly "the political appointees of pro-nuclear administrations." He complains (incorrectly) that we ask readers to "defer" to such "experts" as financiers and regulators, and then calls the anti-nuclear activists "the true experts" because they "have

studied the nuclear power issue as much as anyone." We'd be interested in knowing where Fritzinger gets his information on decision makers' knowledge levels. We suspect his real rationale is that "true" experts are those who agree with him.

Similarly, he belittles the nuclear industry's confidence that we know how to solve problems connected with nuclear energy, claiming that they have remained optimistic while the problems have gotten worse. He presents no evidence for this claim, and he fails to note that outside experts, not just self-interested industrialists, express high levels of confidence. (As Lichter and Stanley Rothman noted in their *Public Opinion* article, 91 percent of America's energy scientists express such confidence.)

We could go on, but we're not sure we could change his mind. We emphasize that our goal as social scientists is not to convert anyone to a pro- or anti-nuclear stance but to provide information that will help readers make an informed decision. We do agree with Fritzinger on one point. Ordinary citizens should have input into public policy debates, and nuclear power is indeed too important to be left solely to the experts. We are also confident that most citizens will approach this highly charged issue in a relatively open-minded and nonpartisan fashion.

The Costs of the Clean Water Act

TO THE EDITOR:

In the "Perspectives" piece "Clean Water: Apocalypse Later" (*Regulation*, July/August 1983) you write: "Just attaining the interim 'fishable and swimmable' goal set for 1983 (and missed) would have cost \$468 billion, not counting whatever might have been required to limit agricultural runoff, according to a 1975 estimate by Allen V. Kneese and Charles L. Schultze for the Brookings Institution." We must take exception to that statement for several reasons.

First, the \$468 billion figure is never stated as such in the book *Pollution, Prices, and Public Policy* that we published together in 1975. It is the sum of a number in the text and one in a footnote.

Second, as we explicitly state in the pertinent text and footnote, the two numbers are not our estimates but rather those of the National Commission on Water Quality. As

we indicated in the text, the commission regarded the first number, \$220 billion, as a rough estimate of achieving best available technology goals for point sources other than urban storm runoff. The number in the footnote, \$248 billion, pertains to storm runoff, and we state, "But no one has any idea of the best way to handle this problem, much less of its realistic cost."

Third, neither of the numbers pertains directly to the goal of "fishable and swimmable" waters. As we stated, they are the commission's estimates of costs for meeting the best available technology goal.

We would have let the matter pass, but there is always a danger that others will pick up such sloppy statements, and we will be saddled with a "Kneese/Schultze" estimate when in fact it is not our estimate at all and when, furthermore, we don't put any faith in some of the numbers composing it.

Allen V. Kneese,
Resources for the Future

Charles L. Schultze,
Brookings Institution

THE EDITORS respond:

We are glad to correct the record: the passage should have read, "according to government estimates cited by Kneese and Schultze in a 1975 report for the Brookings Institution."

The distinction between what it would cost to meet the best-technology standards and what it would cost to reach the "fishable and swimmable" goal is not a very meaningful one in this context. The National Commission on Water Quality thought it would cost a total of \$468 billion to pursue the standards out through 1983, which is when, thanks to the standards, the fishable-swimmable goal was supposed to be reached.

Kneese and Schultze's skepticism about the cost figures is well-grounded, of course, since there is a staggering range of uncertainty about just how much it would cost to meet this and other absolutist standards. All of which reinforces the point we were making in "Apocalypse Later," which is that Congress is being reckless when it mandates such standards without the faintest idea of what they will cost in later years, whether they will achieve the stated goals, or whether the stated goals are sensible. ■

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