

Readers Debate 'The Great Nuclear Power Debate'

Our recent two-part series "The Great Nuclear Power Debate" (Jan. 17 and Jan. 24 issues) has prompted a strong (both in quantity and intensity) reader response. Here is a cross section of letters received. We are foregoing the urge to respond to the criticisms of our coverage, letting both the articles and the letters stand on their merits. Earlier letters appeared in the Feb. 7 and Feb. 14 issues.—Ed.

After two issues purportedly covering the "Nuclear Debate," I am hopeful that highlights from the historical record on the subject can be published in SCIENCE NEWS, now that Mr. Douglas has had his emotional fling.

Might we look forward to significant articles delving into the specific role of the actinides relative to Mr. Douglas's concern that we begin "seeking out and promoting technologies and life-styles that promote harmony among men and nature?" Perhaps SN could begin with pieces on excesses in respiratory cancer in uranium miners, on the traditional costs externalized onto the environment by energy intensification, a comparison on the disordering inherent in removing energy from any fuel, on excesses in cancers in atomic bomb survivors, on atmospheric contamination from intentional releases of Kr-85, on radiological concentrations in Buttermilk Creek, N.Y. . . . Even quoting such papers as WASH-1520 (Contaminated Soil Removal Facility—Richland, Washington, AEC, April 1972) directly rather than publishing Mr. Douglas's emotionally edited versions would serve a meaningful purpose. Please do not misinterpret my use of "emotionally" . . . the decision certainly should include, perhaps heavily weighing, the human "emotions" . . . but it must generate emotional energy from facts, not from partial disclosures and vested interest propaganda generated by any side—pro or con.

There is much that we look to SCIENCE NEWS to do during the ensuing debate to see that the decision to "go nuclear or not" is made on the operational histories available rather than the massaged statistics and uncertain computer modelings. Because of repeated cover-ups, attempts to confuse rather than inform the public and premeditated lying from the nuclear industry as well as the government, and the overreacting of the preservationists and "environmentalists," a great deal of skepticism by the tax-paying public must be dealt with now.

The illumination of the facts will be both time-consuming and expensive and we will certainly relinquish our accustomed number one position to other nations regarding nuclear technology. I trust we will glean valuable enough experience so that we head off toward the number one position in the arena of cooperation . . . if so, then relinquishing our number one position in the arena of competition may well be the greatest breakthrough our country, perhaps the human race, has yet had.

Steven C. Wilson
ENTHEOS/Northwest
Bainbridge Island, Wash.

I am writing simply to express my exceptional satisfaction with the two articles, "The Great Nuclear Power Debate," in the Jan. 17 and 24 issues. The care, and above all, the objectivity, with which the complex issues in this most important subject have been handled, are outstanding even by high SCIENCE NEWS standards. The only suggestion I can make is that the "opponents" in the first article should have a chance to say whether their case has been adequately and fairly presented—a sort of opportunity for appeal by the loser.

Henry L. Deimel
Washington, D.C.

The editorial "Reasoning about Reactors" was generally valid in that there is "more heat than light" being generated in the nuclear power debate. But the example given seemed as biased as any I've heard. If you are going to talk about net energy of the nuclear industry (which I think is one of the major issues) you should state the source of your figures. Then you should find out and publicize what environmental scientists have to say about them. One must be suspicious of all such statements and accept only that information on which opposing sources agree or on which we have validating information of our own.

I think most proponents of nuclear power have obvious, immediate and personal, monetary interests while most environmentalists do not and are more concerned with such things as radioactive wastes which will remain for thousands of years.

Dan Robinson
Oregon Solar Institute
Portland, Ore.

As a writer and safety educator, I have used SCIENCE NEWS as a bridge between the "two cultures" of science and the humanities. However, your recent series on the energy debate brings into question your magazine's objectivity. Your first article purports to be an unbiased summary of both sides of the question; yet, the proponents of nuclear energy are allowed to rebut the "anti" arguments without according the anti side an equal opportunity. The use of such a "straw man," who cannot talk back, is a cheap journalistic trick and cannot substitute for honest debate.

The second group of articles on breeder reactors utilizes innuendoes as its primary method of "shedding light" on the debate: "emotional issues of safety and environmental protection" are contrasted to the real problems of technology, and glowing phrases are applied to the French disregard of safety concerns (" . . . that supremely Gallic dash of élan . . ."). You decry the use of fear within the debate, yet spent more space discussing what unemployment will result if we do not go ahead with the nuclear energy program than all of the space allocated to opposing arguments. The article also challenges the reader to go along with the program because if we don't, we will become even more "technologically inferior," implying that ecology does not really belong in the sciences and is really opposed to all progress.

But the thing that really galls me is John

H. Douglas's pious editorial about keeping the argument on nuclear power above the emotional level, when it is quite clear that it is exactly the level that Mr. Douglas is arguing upon. At least be honest enough to admit your advocacy of nuclear energy and stop masquerading as Socrates' friend.

Lawrence B. Walsh
Aptos, Calif.

I have been impressed with the perspective and light you manage to shed on complicated technical issues. However, I was not impressed with your effort "to put some reason back into the nuclear power debate." Given the extremely high stakes: human life on the one hand, vs. life-style on the other, your discussion lacked both the depth and more finely honed perception to which I have become accustomed.

The breeder reactor article is seriously misleading in its historical perspective. Douglas paints a world in which other countries are now operating breeders whereas the United States is waiting until "1986 for a decision on whether to build a commercial breeder. . . ." He failed to explain that the decision is whether to build another commercial breeder in the United States. The first U.S. commercial breeder, the Detroit Edison Fermi Plant, was activated in 1966, nearly a decade ahead of the French Phénix. It was also delicensed soon thereafter, following a near-meltdown.

In his analysis of the reasons "why the U.S. breeder program [has] fallen so far behind," Douglas fails to assess the impact of the Fermi plant experience on the American nuclear community. Is it not possible that delay in the U.S. program derives as much from caution bred of experience and a concern for public safety as it is by "an academic approach to the problem" and "lulled budget planners?"

Furthermore, Douglas creates the impression that regulatory obstructionism is a bar to present construction of commercial LMFBRs in the United States. Nowhere does the article identify an American utility willing to proceed with construction and waiting for a permit. Is it because none have applied? And if no applications are pending, why has the industry chosen not to pursue breeder development?

Avoiding points such as these along with the superficial comparison of ERDA's and MIT's contradictory studies on the relative costs of nuclear vs. fossil energy, raised more questions in my mind (about both the proper decision and the bias of the reporter) than answers. I was disappointed that your treatment of the issues failed to clarify my perception of the real choices.

Robert E. Yuhnke
Assistant Attorney General
Pennsylvania Department of
Environmental Resources
Harrisburg, Pa.

If nuclear power is as safe as jerks like you think, why does the government have an insurance liability limit on it? Until you answer this question, your so-called "reasoning" is nothing but political propaganda.

John H. Hall Jr.
Houston, Tex.