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Looking Back

Is Nuclear Energy Coming Back?

Nuclear energy production may be on the verge of a long overdue comeback, thanks to a proven safety record and the waning influence of anti-nuclear groups.

In the early 1970s, it was believed that America would have 100 nuclear reactors by 1980 and perhaps 1,000 by the year 2000. Instead, the nuclear industry stagnated, largely due to fears of a nuclear catastrophe in the wake of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. No new nuclear plants have been ordered since the 1970s, and today the United States has only 104 reactors, which combine to provide only a fifth of the nation's power supplies. (By contrast, France gets three-quarters of its power from nuclear reactors.)

The Seabrook nuclear power plant in New Hampshire is a case study in the nuclear energy slowdown. It was proposed in 1968 for completion in the mid-1970s, but was stymied by government regulators and anti-nuclear protestors. Many thousands of people repeatedly rallied and demonstrated against the plant's construction during the late 1970s, sometimes leading to mass-arrests of hundreds of protestors at a time. It was exactly 25 years ago, in May 1980, that the far-left group Food Not Bombs was born during an attempt to occupy the Seabrook plant. The plant was finally finished in 1986. Fifteen years ago, in March 1990, the plant was granted a federal operating license. Since that time, only five other nuclear reactors have been licensed for operation—the most recent almost a decade ago.

Although knee-jerk opposition to nuclear power is still common on the political left, reasonable liberals are realizing that increased use of nuclear energy will reduce the emissions linked to climate change. As a recent article in *Wired* magazine put it, "some of the world's most thoughtful greens have discovered the logic of nuclear power"—logic suggesting that "a clean, green future" can be reached if we "start building nuke plants and keep building them at a furious pace."

Yes, nuclear energy poses problems. Reactor accidents, waste storage, the risk of terrorist attacks or of facilitating nuclear proliferation—these are all serious concerns. But they must be carefully weighed against the virtues of nuclear energy and the vices of other sources of energy. "It is important not to consider nuclear power in isolation," as Nobel laureate Hans Bethe put it in a 1976 article. Bethe, the great nuclear physicist who died in March 2005 at the age of 98, was eminently qualified to judge the risks and benefits of nuclear energy production. "Objections can be raised to *any* attainable source of power," he wrote, and "this country needs to keep its economy going."

The U.S. is now taking the earliest steps toward licensing new nuclear plants for operation perhaps as soon as a decade from now. It is still too soon to know where, if anywhere, this will lead. But for those hoping to reduce emissions as well as American dependence on foreign sources of energy, the nuclear option must be taken seriously.