

Energy Insider by William Engdahl

GAO report blasts Carter

Let's get on with nuclear breeder development, a federal report proposes.

The General Accounting Office, research arm of our nation's legislative branch, has just released a sharp, new policy critique of the Carter administration's nuclear fast breeder policy. The report, bluntly titled, "U.S. Fast Breeder Reactor Program Needs Direction," has been read into the Congressional Record by Cong. Mike McCormack (D-Wash.). The study's conclusions are being largely ignored by the national media and the administration. I want to outline some major aspects of this remarkable situation, aspects that have profound consequences.

James Howard, one of the research coordinators of the Energy and Minerals Division of the GAO who prepared the study, is unusually outspoken for a government official. "It's ludicrous," Howard told me. "Our fast breeder program was the world's most expensive research project until 1977. Then everything went into an about-face." That was the year that newly inaugurated James Earl Carter, who had campaigned on his background as a former Navy nuclear engineer, astonished the world nuclear community by publicly endorsing the conclusions of a Ford Foundation/MITRE report, entitled "Nuclear Power: Issues and Choices." Since that time, the Carter administration has made extraordinary efforts to kill the U.S. fast breeder program, particularly the large test reactor

being built, the Clinch River Liquid Metal Fast Breeder Reactor—our most advanced effort at the time. The arguments used to justify this course were lifted from the pages of the Ford/MITRE study.

That report has been denounced by highly experienced nuclear experts, some of whom had even been involved in preparatory committee reports that led to the final report. One such authority, head of research for one of our largest nuclear vendors, charged that the final conclusions of the Ford study were a fraud, drafted by Aspen Institute strategist John Sawhill, and Harold Brown, then head of California Institute of Technology, presently our Defense Secretary. The final Sawhill report, which was given to the President, ignored expert industry input and fraudulently concluded that the breeder program should be delayed for at least the next three decades because it was not needed and would feed the danger of nuclear weapon proliferation by encouraging other nations to pursue so-called plutonium technologies that could lead to nuclear weapons development.

Howard pointed out that this Carter nonproliferation policy has been "the biggest bust ever." Three years later, the United States has ceased to be the world's major supplier of nuclear fuel and technology, creating international distrust over its unreliability. This has led

many countries to accelerate plans for developing indigenous full fuel-cycle nuclear reactor capability despite costs—precisely the result the Carter policy was ostensibly designed to prevent. Even the international study group formed several years ago at Carter's insistence to study its recommendations, the International Nuclear Fuel-Cycle Evaluation, pointed out the absurdity of Carter's policy.

In their February 1980 report the authors estimated that economical world uranium fuel reserves were sufficient only until 1997 under present slow-growth nuclear fuel requirements, or until 1992 with a more vigorous expansion of nuclear power.

The fast breeder and reprocessing of existing fuel are thus essential to ensure fuel beyond the turn of the century. The Ford report and Carter's people claimed just the opposite.

The GAO report points out that, despite Carter attempts, Congress has continued funding the Clinch River plant every year since 1977. They attack the administration's conclusions for being "based on uncertain data and not supported by the evidence." They point out that unanticipated events such as oil insecurity from the Persian Gulf "could increase the future demand for nuclear energy and the need for early commercialization of breeder reactors."

The point that remains to be addressed is that the United States has a vital stake in aggressively promoting nuclear proliferation abroad as well as at home—something Ike Eisenhower said very plainly during the "Atoms For Peace" offensive. Let's get off the defensive, for once.