

## Energy Insider by William Engdahl

### Regulating America's nuclear future

*The Reagan choice for interim NRC head reflects a continuation of intense backroom battles.*

**E**arlier this month, President Reagan announced that he was naming Dr. Joseph Hendrie, the lone Republican on the five-member Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), to retake his seat as NRC chairman until a final choice can be named. Hendrie was NRC chairman until December 1979, when Carter demoted him to commissioner, replaced by Dr. John Ahearne, a systems analyst protégé of ex-Energy Secretary James Schlesinger. The fight now over the NRC could well determine whether America makes it to the end of the century with adequate energy.

In discussions with nuclear industry spokesmen, I got a sense of urgency over the choice of who heads the NRC. A weak or under-qualified "political" appointee, no matter how well intentioned, they tell me, would be chopped to mincemeat by the slick anti-industry ideologues on the NRC. Right now, it is taking this country as long as 14 years to limp through the required licensing hurdles, intervenor court challenges, and idiotic labyrinth of delays that such anti-growth think tanks as the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) admit are intended to stop nuclear power growth. Countries such as France and Japan take approximately six to seven years to build a 1,000 megawatt nuclear reactor, with perhaps even more stringent safety standards.

A brief review of recent nuclear

history is relevant. One unfortunate event during the Ford administration was passage of the Energy Reorganization Act of 1974 which abolished the Atomic Energy Commission and created a polyglot Energy Research and Development Administration (later DOE) and a separate NRC. With no central nuclear agency or congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, the NRDC and Sierra Club began sharpening their knives.

One of the first commissioners on the new NRC was, and still is, Dr. Victor Gilinsky, a technocrat protégé of Schlesinger's at Rand, the source of a lot of bad ideas in recent years. Gilinsky, together with lawyer-commissioner Peter Bradford, a former Nader-raider from Maine's Public Utility Commission, have consistently provided the inside wrecking and stalling job to ensure that no utility dares to order a new nuclear plant. Ahearne, as chairman, tended to vacillate between pro and anti in his votes. Some 50 to 60 nuclear plants have been canceled as a partial result of a regulatory process which has tended to prioritize willful obstruction above safe, proven energy, jobs, and economic prosperity.

Such delay has meant the loss of approximately 5.5 million tons of stainless, low-grade, and equipment steel and at least 2 million man-years of high-skilled jobs. This says nothing of the absurd regulatory morass created by the Percy-

Glenn 1978 Nuclear Nonproliferation Act, which halted nuclear exports, another estimated loss of some 60-plus reactor exports for a minimum of at least \$23 billion.

This is only part of the reason a top-flight, no-nonsense chairman is needed, and someone good to fill the seat left vacant by the departure of pronuclear Richard Kennedy.

There are worrisome signs that Reagan is being pressured into filling the post with a political appointee. Thomas Roberts, a Memphis businessman who was treasurer of George Bush's presidential bid, was the reported surprise choice. Sources report that Jim McClure, the pronuclear senator from Idaho, and Majority Leader Howard Baker of Tennessee personally convinced the President last week that Roberts was an inadequate choice for the vital post.

Hendrie was named by the President as a fallback until his old term expires in June, or until a final choice is named. Unfortunately, one of the most respected and qualified choices recommended by the NRC Transition Team, Dr. Ben Rusche of the South Carolina Energy Research Institute, a former nuclear safety official with the AEC and NRC, seems to be a victim of White House rumor mill disfavor. Whatever the facts behind charges of "friendship" with Secretary Edwards (hardly a heinous offense compared with some of the cronies of the previous administration), his last minute replacement by someone of Roberts's limited qualifications indicates the fragile state of the process of getting the nation back on a firm nuclear track.

Strong action by the President here could be a far-reaching accomplishment of his administration.