

Energy Insider by William Engdahl

A major setback in France

Here are some sobering thoughts on the implications for the future development of nuclear energy.

Possibly the worst impact of the election of Socialist François Mitterrand in France will be the future of the French nuclear program. The implications are sobering. France, under conservative, progrowth governments, had responded to the 1973 oil price manipulation with what is now the world's fastest growing nuclear program. Let's look at what's at stake, both for France and for the world's energy supplies.

Totally import dependent for its oil, France under the Giscard government committed itself to construction of a total of 47 nuclear plants that will produce more than 60 percent of its electricity. By contrast, the United States today produces only about 11 percent of its electricity with nuclear, and the future of the industry is doubtful, despite pronuclear statements by the Reagan administration.

An indication of the importance the Giscard government placed on being the world's pace-setter during the dog years of the Carter administration is the fact that André Giraud, former head of the French Atomic Energy Commission, was minister of industry. Indeed, over the past two years, the nuclear industry was the only sector of the French economy to show real growth.

I will not go into the history of the creation of the French nuclear program during and after World War II by a group of scientists as-

sembled by the late Gen. Charles de Gaulle. Suffice it to say that as a result of those efforts, the world has a technological chance to make it to 2000 with enough energy.

France, in addition to now being a strong number two after the United States in terms of nuclear capacity, has the world's most advanced nuclear fast breeder program. It has had one prototype breeder generating electricity for almost eight years. The 1,200 megawatt Super-Phénix breeder is scheduled to come on line in 1984. But the U.S. Clinch River Breeder Program still remains a political football.

Giscard, in speaking of the amount of energy the breeder will produce by "breeding" fissile fuel, said, "If the uranium mined in France were one day to be used in breeder reactors, France's energy potential would be comparable to that of Saudi Arabia."

While recycling and reprocessing unused uranium fuel from fuel rods remains in limbo in the United States, France's government recognized that reprocessing was an intelligent way to expand its energy supply. Reprocessing, as Giscard understood, is the solution to the problem of so-called nuclear waste: reprocess 97 percent of it. But aside from the limping British facility at Windscale, France's La Hague is the only major reprocessing facility in the West.

Wisely, France also built the

first uranium enrichment plant, Eurodif, at Tricastin, with participation of Italy, Spain, Belgium, and pre-Khomeini Iran.

Only two months ago, France's major nuclear reactor manufacturer, Framatome, renegotiated its licensing agreement with Westinghouse, giving it the freedom to export its reactors without prior consent of the U.S. Congress (under Percy-Glenn restrictions). With 60 reactors built, under construction, or on order, Framatome has become the world's largest reactor and steam generator manufacturer.

More reactors began operating in France in 1980 than in *all* the rest of the Western world. And France is able to complete a reactor in slightly over five years, through standardization and cumulative experience. France has also begun to anticipate the new export freedom by negotiating with Egypt, Mexico, Taiwan, and South Korea.

Now all this may be down the drain. The Socialist-connected Paris daily *Le Matin* reported May 14 that Mitterrand, who downplayed his antinuclear stance to win election among France's heavily pronuclear population, has announced the immediate suspension of five nuclear plants now under construction, and has ordered indefinite delay of six to seven plants for which siting had been completed. Not until 1982 will Mitterrand consider resuming building the various plants. While *Le Matin* reports that the people living in the vicinities of the affected plants are planning protests against the loss of jobs and potential energy supplies, the impact of seven years of a Mitterrand presidency can only be compared to the four years of the decidedly antinuclear Carter presidency.