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Big Oil Versus The Dangers of Nuclear Power

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As oil prices soar and countries think twice about expanding nuclear power, we should be careful about where to point the finger, says Japan's trauma following the partial meltdown of nuclear reactors in Fukushima has once again brought to the world's attention the dangers of nuclear power. From the start, it was clear that a broad advocacy of nuclear energy is bad ecology. Splitting the atom (or worse, fusing atoms) unleashes intense heat and radiation and produces poisonous waste that lasts for up to 10,000 years or more.

But none of the estimated 18,000 deaths following Japan's earthquake and tsunami were due to nuclear radiation, though long term exposure to the higher levels of radiation in the region will slightly increase cancer rates.

Nuclear power has a strong ecological argument in its favour as compared to the use of hydrocarbons. But using such lethal technology to make a light bulb glow, heat a house or charge a battery is like using a hammer to kill a fly. Appropriate technology in each case would suggest solar, thermal or wind power, tapping the mild warmth of the sun or earth or the movement of air, which produces far fewer side effects.

The advocacy of nuclear power was never about providing safe, clean energy. It was about justifying the technology itself, which was developed in WWII to produce weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

Making pacts with the devil is bad politics. Early advocates of nuclear technology, led by Albert Einstein, were appalled when the US dropped bombs on Japanese civilians in 1945, killing hundreds of thousands of innocent people. He later rued the splitting of the atom, but it was too late. A handful of leaders in a nuclear elite club (Iran need not apply) can now destroy the entire planet hundreds of times over if the spirit moves them.

From the start, it was clear that the civilian use of nuclear technology was also lethal, the major problem being what to do with the toxic waste. Japan's present crisis is not just the reactor meltdowns, but more about what's happening to the tons of spent fuel rods, which ironically are not only poisonous, but continue to emit heat which evaporates the special cooling waters faster than they can be produced.

These dangers were known from the start and gave rise in the 1960s to a movement to end the use of nuclear energy for both peaceful and military purposes.

Nuclear power's main energy competitor is of course Big Oil, which had no problem with nuclear weapons, but was not happy to lose its grip on the world's major source of energy. Nuclear energy was not under their control, requiring by definition major government involvement and regulation of the industry. Its widespread use would leave Big Oil with

falling profits, and would mean the end of Big Oil's economic hegemony.

This led to a bizarre situation where oil companies both founded and funded ecology-related organisations, including the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, Nature Conservancy, Greenpeace, Sierra Club and others to protest the peaceful use of nuclear power. These groups have all received backing from the oil industry, notably Atlantic Richfield Oil and BP (formerly the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, now employing greenwash by marketing itself as "Beyond Petroleum"). Recall that BP is responsible for the world's worst environmental disaster in recent times, last year's oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Big Oil's logic has been to rein in the movement for the arguably cleaner nuclear energy and keep the very dirty oil flowing.

The 1960s anti-nuke movement effectively made a devil's pact with Big Oil (much like the altruistic scientists in the 1930s did with the Pentagon) inadvertently helping the oil devil. Their "logic" presumably was: the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know.

Though the US government officially promoted nuclear energy, from the start the US goal was to keep monopoly control of the technology (the Baruch Plan, 1946) through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA, 1957), a neocolonial-type institution which the US dominates.

But for Big Oil, rather than to prevent countries from building bombs – the intent of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT, 1970), the goal has been to limit the use of civilian nuclear power. Given the budding anti-nuke movement and the fact that Big Oil has a firm stranglehold on US government, it has been able to discourage the US nuclear industry from expanding sales both domestically and around the world.

The period following the oil embargo by OPEC in 1973, when the Arab world tried to use its oil wealth to force Israel to finally make peace, was especially dicey, as many countries decided to opt for nuclear energy given the high cost of oil. Big Oil and the anti-nuke movement were successful in stalling this development (the peace movement, alas, was not successful in eliminating nuclear WMDs).

In the US no new nuclear reactors were ordered and scores of half-built or planned nuclear projects were cancelled after 1979. Plans by oil-poor Brazil and Germany to undertake nuclear programmes in the 1970s were cancelled. Pakistani prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was planning a major nuclear power programme but was overthrown in a US-approved coup in 1977 as too close to the Soviet Union, and his successor General Zia cancelled Bhutto's plans.

Iran started a nuclear power programme in the mid-1970s in conjunction with France and Germany; however, the Shah was already becoming too independent, using petrodollars for local development rather than to finance the US trade deficit. Khomeini was flown back to Iran as the Shah wrote in exile, "The Americans wanted me out," and the nuclear energy programme was shelved.

As for the growing chorus for renewable energy technologies, which do not have the long term storage dangers of nuclear power, oil companies (especially BP and Shell) depict themselves as being on the forefront of research and buy up patents as they are developed, which will allow a controlled transition to non-oil energy — if necessary — but still in their

hands.

So Big Oil deserves a backhanded tribute, our faint praise, for discouraging the proliferation of peaceful nuclear energy, though its motives were far from pure. Only Japan and France, both starved of hydrocarbon energy, produce the majority of their electricity via nuclear power. France has the cleanest air in Europe, the cheapest electricity, and, not having any faultlines, no record of nuclear disasters.

True, the legacy of nuclear technology is still on the whole negative. It culminated in a "Faustian bargain", writes Richard Falk, "sold to the non-nuclear world: give up a nuclear weapons option and in exchange get an unlimited 'pass' to the 'benefits' of nuclear energy." The NPT even promised complete disarmament by all existing nuclear powers, but this was the devil's promise.

The IAEA and NPT were used to bully nations into complying with a stingy, invasive Western agenda, and there has been no disarmament for the big guys. Instead, the US and Russia agreed to START "arms control", which amounts to them agreeing on how best to improve their nuclear WMDs. Even this figleaf was possible only after United States President Barack Obama bribed the senate by adding $80 billion to the Pentagon's nuclear budget.

There is still an argument for nuclear energy. When you need a hammer, a hammer is the appropriate technology. For a spacecraft or submarine, the risks involved perhaps can justify its use. But unbridled use of nuclear energy merely to promote economic growth is not justified. And building nuclear plants on faultlines is the height of folly. Furthermore, it is the height of hypocrisy for the US to control the use of nuclear technology while maintaining its own massive arsenal of nuclear WMDs.

While we can thank Big Oil and its unwitting US governmental accomplices for slowing down the rush to nuclear energy, Big Oil is far more of a killer than is the nuclear power industry, both directly due to massive pollution and oil wars, and as a result of oil-fuelled global warming. Nature's revenge for Big Oil's activities will be far more lethal than for our use of peaceful nuclear energy.

The lesson from Japan's earthquake is that there is no magic energy bullet. Giant wind turbines and ambitious solar farms create their own environmental and political problems. As oil prices sore and Big Oil gloats following Japan's tragedy, we are reminded that we must reduce all our violations of nature to a minimum. That is the only truly safe sustainable development strategy. The devil you know and the ones you don't know are still devils.

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