

The Fukushima Disaster and Nuclear Power in Japan: ‘If You Love Your Country, Let Nuclear Go!’

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Nuclear power is a uniquely hazardous technology that can destroy entire nations, Japan’s prime minister Naoto Kan at the time of the Fukushima nuclear disaster has warned British MPs. The lessons of from such catastrophes must be heeded in other countries that believe that nuclear fission can be harnessed safely, writes Linda Pentz Gunter – or they, and the world, will reap the whirlwind.

One quarter of the country’s population would have had to flee if all the fuel had escaped at Fukushima. We came that close. If 50 million people had had to evacuate Japan, as a state our very survival would have been questioned.

It’s widely agreed here in the rapidly Disuniting States of America that the most notorious of the Republican presidential candidates have not only abandoned, but torn up the rulebook of acceptable behavior. Lies, taunts, profanities all have become the norm.



Naoto Kan, as prime minister of Japan, responding to the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe on live television, 14th August 2013. Image: NNK World TC via Youtube.

But what if one of those candidates promised, if elected, to risk the death or permanent exile of a quarter of the country’s population? That would surely evoke the well-used slur of the Right: ‘unpatriotic!’

And insane, you say. Except that being certifiably unhinged doesn’t seem to be a disqualifying factor in US presidential campaigns these days. Still: purposely putting your electorate at risk [when other choices are open to you](#) certainly smacks of treachery.

In the normal scheme of things, leaders of nations don't set out to deliberately wreck their countries, although arguably some have made political choices that have done precisely that.

It's therefore no coincidence that the leaders at the time of the two countries that have experienced the world's most catastrophic nuclear disasters, are fervent campaigners against any further use of nuclear energy.

They see the choice to continue with nuclear power, knowing the risk to the nation they swear an oath to protect, as tantamount to declaring war on your own country.

Former leaders during nuclear meltdowns, now oppose nuclear power

Former Soviet Premier, Mikhail Gorbachev, who led the then USSR during the April 1986 Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion in Ukraine; and Naoto Kan who was prime minister of Japan when the March 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster began, both now travel the speakers' circuit extolling the need to abolish nuclear power.

Kan, now 69, who resigned the premiership in August 2011, has become a ubiquitous and compelling voice for the global anti-nuclear movement. Gorbachev is equally on board but, due to age and infirmity (he turns 85 on March 2nd) is less often in evidence.

Kan made his case in January during a presentation at the UK's House of Commons co-organized by Nuclear Free Local Authorities, Green Cross International (the group Gorbachev founded) and Nuclear Consulting Group. Gorbachev was scheduled but had to cancel.

Kan compared the potential worst-case devastation that could be caused by a nuclear power plant meltdown as tantamount only to *"a great world war. Nothing else has the same impact."*

Japan escaped such a dire fate during the Fukushima disaster, said Kan only *"due to luck"*. But he is clearly haunted by the map his advisors showed him in the early days of the still unfolding triple meltdowns, one he screened for his London audience:

I was shown this map with a 250km radius around Fukushima. An area home to 50 million people. One quarter of the country's population would have had to flee if all the fuel had escaped at Fukushima. We came that close. If 50 million people had had to evacuate Japan, as a state our very survival would have been questioned.

The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few

Even so, Kan had to make some steely-nerved decisions that necessitated putting all emotion aside. In a now famous phone call from Tepco, when the company asked to pull all their personnel from the out-of-control Fukushima site for their own safety, Kan told them no. The workforce must stay. The few would need to make the sacrifice to save the many.

Kan knew that abandoning the Fukushima Daiichi site would cause radiation levels in the surrounding environment to soar, in turn forcing the evacuation of the neighbouring, and still functioning, Fukushima-Daiini nuclear site.

With all 10 Fukushima reactors and 11 spent fuel pools untended, there would be multiple meltdowns and the likely ignition of nuclear waste in onsite storage ponds, cascading into an unending radiological disaster. Kan would be ordering that most dreaded 250km evacuation, including the city of Tokyo.

His insistence that the Tepco workforce remain at Fukushima was perhaps one of the most unsung moments of heroism in the whole sorry saga.

It was then, said Kan, who trained as a physicist, that his whole energy perspective was forever altered. *"It was a moment when my view on nuclear power changed 180 degrees."* Sticking with the nuclear energy path meant that *"the country would go down in ruin."* He could no longer in all conscience *"make the decision to go with nuclear power and risk the survival of a nation."*

Looking then at the sprinkling of MPs who had bothered to attend the presentation in person, Kan reminded them that their current refugee problem would pale compared to the kind of nuclear evacuation they could confront in the UK. Where, he asked them, would all those millions of people go?

87 US Senators blithely voted for more spending on nuclear energy

Renouncing nuclear, then, is the ultimate act of patriotism. Love of country (or *"cournty"* as the typo-loving Ted Cruz campaign would say) should mean making decisions that protect it, not letting it turn into a radioactive wasteland.

Which makes it so hard to understand why any US political leader on the Left or Right – but especially those Freedom Fries-loving, jingoistic wall-building, Make-America-Great-Again saber rattlers – would continue to support, promote and secure funds for an industry that could kill tens of thousands of people and exile even more.

The argument that it can't or won't happen in the US was undermined by Chernobyl, then obliterated by Fukushima.

Senator Bernie Sanders, a true independent currently running for president on the Democratic ticket, was on top of that reality early. In a March 2012 Senate hearing on Fukushima he reminded us that, *"with nuclear power, 99.9% safe is not good enough."* Sanders had reason to be alarmed as the then still functioning but now closed Vermont Yankee reactor in his state is the same design as those at Fukushima.

Nevertheless, the Republican Party, and a shamefully large swath of Democrats as well, voted lockstep in the Senate on January 28 for the Nuclear Innovation Capabilities Act, an amendment shoe-horned into the massive Senate Energy Policy Modernization Act still under discussion.

With very little fanfare, 87 senators were happy to endorse the squandering of likely billions more taxpayer dollars on yet another nuclear snipe hunt, dreaming of fusion and fast reactors, when solar and wind would do very nicely instead.

So much money, so much risk

As Sanders noted in the 2012 hearing, *"the future of nuclear power will one hundred percent be determined by whether or not the taxpayers of this country continue to provide huge,*

huge financial support to the nuclear power industry for the indefinite future.”

Ditto the current regime in Japan, led by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who is intent on restarting the country’s still operable reactors (three down 40 to go) including the latest at Takahama which uses plutonium fuel. He is also an ardent exporter of nuclear reactor technology, apparently as eager to destroy other countries as his own.

One willing client is the UK which is looking to build a Japanese Hitachi reactor at its Wylfa site in Wales. Never mind that the country’s flagship two-reactor [EDF project at Hinkley C](#) has turned into the worst kind of French farce with costs currently estimated at \$36 billion and rising.

As Dr. Paul Dorfman of the Nuclear Consulting Group told the House of Commons audience in January: *“It’s deeply difficult to see why one could wish to spend so much money to take so many risks.”*

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