

THE SOLUTION TO THE NUCLEAR WASTE DILEMMA:
OUR SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AND CHALLENGE

Stanley D. Flint
State Coordinator
Citizens Against Nuclear Disposal, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

I am relieved to be able to tell you that, upon my return to Mississippi, I can report that you all really do not have horns, hooves, and pointed tails, and you do not carry pitchforks. There are still people back home who will be surprised to hear this. I hope when you all return to your respective homes, you too will report that people such as I, who oppose the present program for disposal of high level radioactive waste, do not want to return to living in the dark ages, or to bankrupt the nuclear industry; and that we are not a bunch of ignorant and naive backpackers and river rafting no-goodniks. I am sure this will surprise some of your people, especially Secretary of the Interior, James Watt. Misconceptions such as these obscure the real fact that a vast majority of people on both sides of the radioactive waste disposal issue are good, honest people trying to do what is best for their country. We all must recognize that perpetuation of such misconceptions is in no one's best interest, and if allowed to continue, will result in insurmountable obstacles to resolution of this critical issue.

My knowledge and experience in nuclear waste disposal arises from organizing opposition to the Department of Energy's approach to studies of Mississippi's Gulf Interior Salt Domes as candidate sites for a high level waste repository. I will discuss the background and current status of the waste disposal program in Mississippi as a case study in an effort to give you an understanding of public sentiment and the state of public education. Perhaps from this approach you can reach some conclusions and embark on a new direction of public involvement in the decision making process regarding radioactive waste disposal.

BACKGROUND

Citizens Against Nuclear Disposal, Inc., is a statewide, non-profit corporation chartered by the State of Mississippi for the purpose of educating the public concerning the disposal of high level nuclear waste in Mississippi salt domes. We were organized by lifetime residents of Mississippi and are informed, mature, responsible and professional mainstream Americans. We are not kooks, freaks, or commies and we are not anti-everything obstructionists. Our name tells what we stand against, but what initially motivated us to act is what we stand for. As outlined in our policy statement, "C.A.N.D. supports the progressive, responsible and organized growth of business, commerce and agriculture in Mississippi. Our commitment to Mississippi's future development, resources and environment, as well as that of the U.S.A., mandate that we oppose selection of the state

as a radioactive waste repository. C.A.N.D. does not address the issues of nuclear energy or armaments." The public policy statement goes on to say, "Every state shares equal responsibility to help find a solution for the disposal of defense produced wastes. The responsibility of the federal government, however, is to find the safest possible means of disposing of these wastes, regardless of industry pressure and/or political considerations. By its own admission, D.O.E. cannot guarantee that radioactive wastes will be isolated. . .for the hundreds of years necessary to protect our population and vital resources from contamination. Our duty as responsible citizens is to prevent the federal government from yielding to a selection rationale based on other than technical, socio-economic, and environmental factors." We do not believe adequate and comprehensive decisions can be made by bureaucrats, technicians, politicians or industry executives.

Acceptable decisions regarding radioactive waste disposal can only be based on the opinions of and acceptance by an informed public. Any other program is doomed from the start, and the current status in Mississippi is a textbook case of what will happen when the public is not comprehensively involved. For example, C.A.N.D. sponsored the Mississippi Nuclear Waste Forum in November of 1981, for the purpose of allowing the public to hear both sides of the nuclear waste debate. Over 5,000 Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama residents attended this event, but unfortunately, they only heard the anti-disposal argument. The D.O.E., Battelle Institute, and Dr. Edward Teller, refused to attend despite their written acceptances of our invitations to speak on the pro side of the issue. The reason given our organization by D.O.E. and Battelle for pulling out of the program was schedule conflicts. Their media response indicated they did not consider the event an adequate forum for the dissemination of information. Both D.O.E. and Battelle, admitting their true reasons privately to state officials, stated that, "they didn't feel they had anything to gain by showing up". The result of these events was a widespread public perception that D.O.E. and Battelle were conspiring to obstruct public information and involvement in the radioactive waste issue.

I flew to Dallas, Texas, in an effort to personally convince Dr. Teller of the importance of his attendance, and to assure him that the event would be conducted responsibly. In a tape recorded meeting at the Adolphus Hotel, Dr. Teller informed me that he believed we were "setting a trap", for the pro side; that he was committed to the forum's failure; and that he would do anything within his power to discredit the forum, my organization, and even me personally unless I responded "no comment" to media inquiries regarding his pulling out of the program. In Mississippi the public is still sure Dr. Teller carries a pitchfork.

CURRENT STATUS

Mississippi is probably the path of greatest resistance to the siting of a nuclear repository in this country. Opposition is practically unanimous across the state, and pervades every level of the public, government, business, industry and the church. The D.O.E.'s and Battelle's credibility in my state is irretrievably damaged. The battle for public acceptance of a disposal plan is lost in Mississippi, and there is little or no chance that we will ever accept a high level waste repository. The radwaste disposal program in Mississippi is a failure and a debacle. I do not say this to point a finger of blame or to assess fault, but in order to find a solution I am duty bound to make you understand the nature and magnitude of the problem. Standard operating procedure simply will not work in the management of the nation's high level radioactive waste as the Mississippi case proves. It is neither unusual for the public to be removed from decision making, nor is it odd that a federal program be affected at all levels by industry pressure and political expediency. The issue of radwaste disposal is what's extraordinary, and its administration demands a long range approach based on public understanding and approval and must rise above manipulation by special interests and political motives. All efforts to squeeze this program into the fast track time frame places management in an untenable position and will fail. A similar situation would have resulted if Congress had passed a law requiring the space shuttle to be launched on a certain date whether it was finished or not which obviously would not succeed. This approach is perceived by the affected public as an army tank with its engine off coasting inexorably down a mountain toward their site.

Has D.O.E. learned anything from their experience in Mississippi? A study of the proposed D.O.E. guidelines for site recommendation shows that they have not. There are no site disqualifying factors listed as required by the newly enacted Waste Disposal Act; states had no role in guideline formulation; there is a lack of adequate technical criteria, conflict resolution procedures, adequate accountability and decision making processes and specificity just to name a few problems.

CONCLUSION

The nuclear question is the most critical issue the human race has ever faced, and for the first time in history the public is capable of making a valid decision. In the beginning of the nuclear age there was widespread public support for nuclear development, which has shifted to fear, mistrust and opposition. Public support did not decline as a result of fear and ignorance, but because their confidence has been eroded through simple understanding of the magnitude of the question and through experience with the government's handling of nuclear issues.

Public perception today is shaped by several factors which leave no room for mistakes on your part. The constant threat of nuclear annihilation by a runaway arms race, majority opposition to nuclear power in the wake of the T.M.I. accident, and widespread local and state opposition to radwaste disposal should make it clear that this issue must be handled with integrity, technological conservatism and with the support of the American public. Administration of the high level waste disposal program must be

removed from political manipulation and revamped. Public relations, cosmetics, quick fixes, slogans, or even bulldozing will not work. We have fifty years to solve this problem and unless we turn this program into an experiment in public participation it may spell the end of the nuclear age in America.

Albert Einstein said the nuclear question must be discussed and settled in the town squares of this country, and the American public will ultimately make the decision regarding the nuclear option.

The solution to the nuclear waste dilemma and our shared responsibility and challenge is to create a decision making process that prioritizes and respects public wisdom while providing for public education and participation in all levels of policy making. This is a new idea and is not the easiest approach in the short term, but anything less will fail, as it did in Mississippi, and the results of failure are unthinkable for us all.