

# Letters

## Nuclear Power Risks

Since Robert Gillette has reported (News and Comment, 31 Jan., p. 331) on the energy policy statement signed by 34 prominent American scientists, I thought your readers would be interested in the way that statement has already been misrepresented in our state. Although I do not agree with many of the premises and evaluations which led the group to conclude that this country should rapidly develop nuclear power sources, I know that, as colleagues in science with a lifelong commitment to truth, we would all find common ground in resisting public confusion, if not deliberate misuse, of carefully reasoned statements.

At a public meeting in Baton Rouge on 20 January, the vice president of Engineering and Design of Gulf States Utilities Company, which is about to build two nuclear reactors in this area, used the statement as evidence that nuclear plants are "perfectly safe," although the statement said nothing of the kind. Rather it said that "All energy release involves risks and nuclear power is certainly no exception." While it went on to say, in a value judgment, that the risks involved are not high enough to override the benefits, it is quite possible that leading scientists would be set up for public ridicule and disrespect by such misrepresentation, since more and more citizens are coming to learn of the grave risks involved in nuclear power generation. The scientific community can ill afford to perpetuate and enhance the growing public feeling that it is merely an uncritical, perhaps even a disreputable, adjunct of business and government in the United States. If that feeling continues to be reinforced, are we not likely to find ourselves suffering under a sweeping antiscientific backlash in the near future?

A further clarification by such eminent scientists would be welcome. It might be well, for example, to address for the American people the matter of the entire nuclear fuel cycle, not merely the power plant. The brief men-

tion of "the difficult areas of transportation and nuclear waste disposal" play down the problems by using the term "difficult." Is this not very much like the euphemisms vested interests often used to hide embarrassing problems, and is not such language likely to discredit the scientific community's reputation for willingness to look truth in the face no matter how harsh it may be? Shouldn't it be said that, so far, the waste disposal problem has frustrated all technological solution, and also that the dangers in transportation of toxic chemicals have already proved so grave that the Atomic Energy Commission recommended a national police force and "nuclear parks" as possible solutions to the problem? In care for the integrity of all scientists, shouldn't the American people be told also of the vulnerability of the highly radioactive spent fuel storage area adjacent to every plant and the high inventory of extremely "hot" spent fuel at the commercial nuclear fuel reprocessing plants that are yet to be completed? Might it not be important also to consider and discuss the absence, in calculations such as those in the "Rasmussen report," of allowance for purposeful acts like sabotage and terror? Were that allowance made, a total recalculation of risks would be required.

Finally, I would like to question the assumptions as well as the evaluations of that "energy policy" statement. It could be argued, for example, that the survival of Western civilization as we know it need not require the enormous growth of per capita consumption of energy that has been witnessed and is further projected for the country. Whether the quality of life in the United States was appreciably better in 1970 than it was 10 years earlier (during which time per capita consumption increased by 33 percent) is debatable, but surely in that 10-year period or in the period from 1970 to 1973, when it increased another 10 percent, we have not witnessed a radical change for the better; nor need we believe that a slowing or even a moratorium on per capita consumption

would mean a return to the Neolithic age.

Because there is a common ground for seekers of scientific truth, Hans Bethe and his 33 colleagues should not rest content with their first public statement but should speak once again with greater clarity and comprehensiveness. And I hope that others with the knowledge and opinions our society needs to help it make intelligent choices will also speak out loudly and clearly. This and all future generations have a great stake in the course of the nuclear power technology. Public discussion and debate can only improve our chances for survival.

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## Coastal Zone Management

In his description of a hoped-for national environmental policy for guiding future growth and development in this country, Luther Carter (News and Comment, 10 Jan., p. 45) has provided a brief but accurate description of an already existing federal program—the Coastal Zone Management Program, which has all the essential elements that Carter says many in Congress think are needed.

The Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 is national in that it provides guidelines to the states, but allows development decisions to be made locally. The act requires a system of land classification in the state's coastal region (including identification of sites especially suitable for development and those areas deserving of protection) and provides for state oversight of particularly critical areas. Since each participating state is devising its own program, it cannot be said exactly what type of protection and coverage each will provide.

The program got underway only during the past year. It is winning increased recognition as a potential means of resolving conflicts among governmental entities and among private interests. The President signed on 2 January a measure authorizing additional funds this fiscal year to help states accelerate those aspects of their management programs designed to mitigate the negative landside impacts which could stem from projected additional offshore oil and gas activity.