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## (Continued from page 667)

called for construction of at least a few synthetic fuel plants, at government expense if necessary, as a form of insurance against the petroleum exporting countries' greed. Still others, impressed with how soon world oil production might begin to decline (10 to 25 years are common estimates) and how long it takes to build up a new industry, have urged rapid and wholesale moves to synthetic fuels.

This debate is reflected in the ambivalence about coal and synthetic fuels in Congress and in the country as a whole. Congress, for example, last year killed a bill to permit federal loan guarantees for the first commercial synthetic fuel plants. Revived this year, the bill was passed by three different committees in the House but gutted in the fourth, and its future is very uncertain. Many observers of the coal research program seem to think that Congress, whose 35 committees and subcommittees dealing with energy leave ERDA little that it can call its own policies, may in fact have set the agency a nearly impossible task in asking it to push the commercialization of new technologies under present conditions.

This ambivalence about coal and about taking decisive measures to relieve this country's dependence on scarce fuels-oil and gas-is not restricted just to Congress. Environmentalists who are opposed to nuclear power plants do not endorse coal-fired plants in their stead. Few industrial companies want to exchange the convenience of oil and gas for the unfamiliar complexities of the equipment necessary to clean up coal or to convert it to a form usable in their existing plants, either. General Motors, for example, which faces a cutoff of the natural gas used in its body plants, has leased drilling equipment and is seeking to develop its own sources of gas rather than buy gasifiers and coal.

Perhaps this reluctance to come to terms with coal explains why White told *Science*, "What we need to get the synthetic fuels program going is a really cold winter," a sentiment echoed by others. That event would most immediately affect the supply of natural gas and draw new attrention to efforts to make synthetic gas, which will be the subject of a second article. But it is a sad comment on the state of the nation's coal research program that its success, so crucial to any eventual hope of energy independence, is so widely acknowledged to be as uncertain as the weather.

—Allen L. Hammond

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