

# Carter Loses on Breeder Reactor, Again

Over President Carter's resolute objections, the U.S. House of Representatives has once again endorsed full funding for the controversial Clinch River breeder reactor. The vote on 26 July represented the latest setback to the President's plan to terminate the project entirely, replacing it with a continuing program of scientific research on the breeder concept. The vote also represents what Administration officials concede was a failure in the lobbying effort of its top scientists.

If the vote is sustained by the Senate when Congress returns from its August recess, this will be the second occasion that Carter's wishes on the \$2.6-billion breeder demonstration project have been overridden. A year ago, Congress approved full funding for the project despite the President's call in April 1977 for its quick demise.

That call was a swift and startling reversal of the government's policy, initially set in 1970, to develop a prototype breeder that would pave the way to more efficient use of the nation's scarce supply of uranium (the breeder will extract from uranium many times the energy extracted by a conventional light-water reactor). Carter's argument against the breeder was the same then as it is now: Current projections of uranium indicate that demand for a breeder reactor may not exist until the year 2010 or perhaps 2025; by then, the design of the current reactor on the bank of the Clinch River in Tennessee will be outmoded. Carter also says commercialization of the breeder concept will require construction of nuclear fuel reprocessing plants that might encourage the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

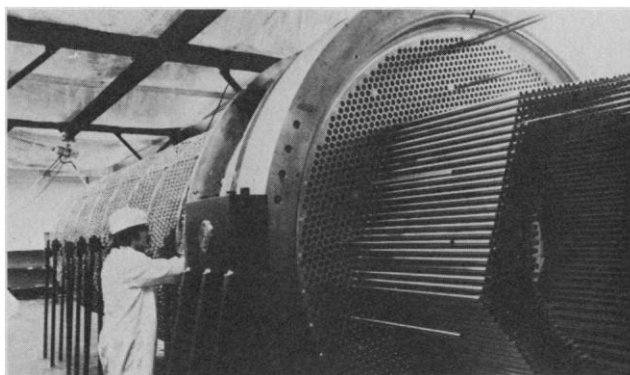
A year ago, these arguments failed to impress enough congressmen to stop the project, and as demonstrated by the latest vote, few have changed their minds since. Led by pronuclear Representative Mike McCormack (D-Wash.), chairman of the subcommittee on energy research and production, the House rejected by 182 to 237 votes an Administration-backed plan that would continue research as well as construction of a few key components—but would completely terminate the Clinch River project. Predictions of Senate behavior are mixed, but if it concurs, funding for the breeder will be set at \$183 million in the 1980 budget, and spending will continue at a rate of \$15 million each month. The President has threatened to veto the Department of Energy authorization bill if breeder funding is retained; a year ago, however, he approved it even though the funding was retained.

The House vote came after the Administration had mounted a major lobbying effort. Top Administration scientists, led by John Deutch, the undersecretary of energy, brought several hundred congressmen and congressional staff members to the Old Executive Office Building next to the White House for briefings on Carter's position. Also present were Thomas Pickering, assistant secretary of state for scientific affairs; Eliot Cutler, an energy and science expert at the Office of Management and Budget; and Gus Speth, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality. Although presidential science adviser Frank Press had no active role in the debate, an assistant from his office, Ted Greenwood, sat in at several of the sessions.

Those invited were told that the supply of uranium is

higher than expected, and the design of the Clinch River project is awkward, outmoded, and uneconomical. "From all the evidence staring us in the face, the Clinch River breeder reactor is a turkey," says one DOE official.

Both staff and members proved resistant, in part because a General Accounting Office report—prepared at McCormack's behest—flatly challenged the White House statistics on overall costs and uranium supply. Facts and figures prepared by the Administration and circulated in a "white paper" at the meetings were termed "highly questionable," lacking in credibility, and "misleading" in the GAO's report. In particular, the GAO said that other data



*Carter has been unable to stop construction of major breeder components, such as this intermediate heat exchanger.*

supplied by DOE officials suggested that a shortage of uranium could develop as early as the mid-1990's. The GAO statements were said to have made a significant impression on the House. "We lost credibility," says one high-ranking Administration official.

Many House members also saw the vote as a test of general support for nuclear power, support that remains high in Congress despite the recent accident at Three Mile Island. "Congress apparently feels the Administration is not doing enough on nuclear power," Pickering of the State Department says in reflection. "Clinch River has an almost mystical hold on people, serving as a rallying cry for nuclear power backers."

Others apparently saw it as a vote for more energy. "The thrust of this bill can be summarized in three words: supply, supply, and supply," said Representative John Wyder (R-N.Y.), immediately before the vote was cast. "I say let us not be a timid Congress," he added. Similar thoughts were voiced by a key House staffer: "The fact is, the breeder will produce energy, so let's stop fooling around and get on with it. Such was the mood of the House."

Finally, there is some evidence that combatants on the opposite side—both in Congress and in the public interest groups—were war-weary from fighting the breeder in the past. Some were apparently upset by Carter's promises of a bigger, better breeder demonstration project in the future if the current one is forsworn. An aide to Representative George Brown (D-Calif.), chairman of the subcommittee on research and technology and an opponent of the Clinch River breeder, says that, for whatever reason, "We just didn't do our job, again."—R. JEFFREY SMITH