SCIENCE

16 MAY 1986
VOLUME 232
NUMBER 4752

The Winds of Change

Truth, like radioactivity, is difficult to contain. It tends to drift out of control. Small amounts are easily detectable and usually serve as tracers to larger and more significant revelations. The Soviet Union is learning this, and it will be interesting to see whether the fallout from their policy of secrecy is even more significant than the decaying fission products that illustrate it.

Reporters and government officials in foreign countries are carrying out a type of forensic medicine, trying to diagnose the events that have occurred in Chernobyl. In the face of the conventional secrecy of the Soviet Union, distant measurements of radioactivity and the expertise of scientists are being used to reconstruct what probably occurred. Perhaps of even more importance than the accident itself will be the illumination of the procedures of decision-making in the Soviet Union. One has to wonder whether someone in the lower echelons of the decision-making apparatus urged, "This is an accident that cannot be concealed. We should not follow our convention of secrecy but should announce it immediately." If anyone said this, he or she was clearly overruled.

The tendency to suppress or to conceal bad news is endemic in every government, in every civilization: history tells us what happened to messengers who brought bad news. The United States, when in the grip of McCarthyism fired the China hands who told unpleasant truths. Democracies have an enormous antidote to any desire to conceal truth: a free press. Dictatorships can suppress news in some cases, but nuclear disasters are different. Once sizable amounts of radiation have escaped local containment, any competent scientist could explain that it will be measured abroad. A combination of curiosity and anxiety will maintain the pressure to learn what actually happened at Chernobyl. From a scientist's point of view, this curiosity is well justified and is not merely a desire for gossip.

The nuclear power industry is here to stay despite its difficulties. Its future depends on incremental increases in safety, much like the airline industry which has progressed by careful study of each accident. Hard data—what set off the fire, exposure of individuals, retention of radioactivity in the soil, for example—are invaluable if analyzed objectively and scientifically. The privilege of operating a nuclear reactor should imply the responsibility to warn others of potential hazards and to provide information for a global improvement in safety.

The initial Soviet secrecy and delay in announcing the accident were bad mistakes. Continuation will further erode Soviet credibility. Gorbachev now has a chance to look inside his bureaucracy. Did anyone predict the course of events? If so, should not they be strengthened as future advisers? If no one spoke up, was it due to incompetence or fear of a policy rigidity? Whatever the cause, changes are clearly needed.

Just before the Soviet's guarded announcement of the catastrophe, there was a meeting at the National Academy of Sciences on command and control decisions during a nuclear crisis. Discussed were the awesome decisions that must be made should a nuclear confrontation between superpowers arise. Facts about troop movements, submarine deployments, and other defense strategies are only one aspect of crisis management; the decision-making apparatus and its ability to encourage and evaluate wildly different hypotheses are equally important. The accident at Chernobyl and its handling by the Soviet government is obviously going to effect our perception of its handling of even more important crises among the superpowers. The tendency of crisis managers to escalate military options on a preprogrammed scenario increases if they believe that the other side cannot adapt to new information. A system that has flexibility is needed for far more than determining electric power needs or public relations.

If there is any silver lining to this episode, it may be the message that those who tell painful truths in private are more helpful than those who accede to the party line. When facts travel on the wind, they should trigger information that travels even faster.

—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.