Failure Seen for Big-Scale, High-Technology Energy Plans

Environmentalists come, by and large, from the more comfortable reaches of the middle class, and, this being true, most are at one with the rest of the affluent society in the lavish use of energy and other resources. Nonetheless, conservation of energy and all nonrenewable resources has long been a watchword of the environmentalists—they were preaching it on the first "Earth Day," in the spring of 1970, and even before. It was therefore predictable that, when a special environmental task force reported on 2 February to a meeting of the faithful in Washington on "The Unfinished Agenda," * the central theme should be that the nation must become a "conserver-society." But what was not predictable was that this task force—made up of leaders of solidly respectable middle-class organizations, such as the National Audubon Society and the Sierra Club, and sponsored by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund—should go so far as to recommend a phaseout of nuclear energy over the next 10 years and a major shift away from large-scale, high-technology energy development generally.

A Message to President Carter

The task force report is meant to let President Carter and his new Administration know how a representative group of environmentalists assesses the problems and the priorities across a wide range of issues, including those having to do with population and food policies, air and water pollution, control of toxic substances, and even the regulation of recombinant DNA research. But it comes to its most striking conclusions in discussing energy policy.

The report holds that, up to now, national energy policy has been characterized by a heavy emphasis on large-scale, capital-intensive, and potentially environmentally disruptive endeavors to rapidly increase supplies of energy, especially electricity. This policy, with its early pretensions to "energy independence" by 1985, is put down as a sure failure, in part because of enormous and unsustainable demand for capital investments totaling more than $1 trillion over the next decade.

Although the report dwells more on the alleged drawbacks of nuclear power than on those associated with other big, capital-intensive energy technologies, it is unsparing in its treatment of all of them. This is how it sums up their prospects:

> The large coal-synthetics and oil-shale industries once envisioned will never be built because they waste too much energy and capital. Massive strip-mining of the arid West will never become publicly acceptable. The full exploitation of the Arctic is only a dream. The electric utility industry is faltering and may soon be financially moribund, in part because the utility laws force the utilities to be so wasteful of both capital and energy. And above all, nuclear power is dying. Dying not only because in economic terms it is too capital-intensive to be viable as a long-range energy option, but because the more debate surrounds it, the less viable it becomes as a political reality. Nuclear proponents are winning a few battles, but losing the war.

Besides calling for an early phaseout of nuclear power, the report recommends that all subsidies be withdrawn from all of the energy industries, and that the antitrust and securities laws be vigorously enforced. It holds that all of the large-scale, capital-intensive energy technologies would lead to bad results: compulsory governmental diversion of capital, skills, water, and other scarce resources; huge concentrations of political and economic power; and conflicts between central (often federal) authority and local governments as energy projects are thrust upon people who do not want them and high social costs are imposed on politically weak but resource-rich regions—such as Appalachia or the Navajo country in the southwest—for the benefit of urban energy consumers.

The task force's own "blueprint" for an energy policy calls chiefly for a two-pronged strategy that would involve cutting energy demand by half through conservation and using and developing "soft" energy technologies, such as solar heating and cooling, wind power, and conversion of organic matter. Instead of more large centralized energy systems, as typified by big electric generating plants hooked up to regional and national power grids, a profusion of small-scale energy systems of various kinds at the local, neighborhood, and householder levels would be promoted. Coal and other fossil fuels would be used judiciously over the next few decades in making the transition to the new energy era.

Although the report represents a consensus of the thinking of the 13 members of the task force, certain chapters were prepared by outsiders. The energy chapter was done by Amory B. Lovins, a British physicist who drew heavily on his widely noticed article ("Energy Strategy: The Road Not Taken") in the October 1976 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. As it happens, Lovins was also among nine environmentalists, economists, and energy specialists who met for 3 days last October at a Georgia retreat to draft what has since been circulated as "The Wolf Creek Statement: Toward a Sustainable Energy Society." †

This paper, also addressed to the attention of the Carter Administration, is no less pessimistic than the report of the Rockefeller Brothers task force in its view of the conventional approach to solving the energy problem. And it, too, recommends a major new emphasis on conservation and a gradual shift to small-scale, decentralized energy technologies based largely on solar energy. But, in its recommendations for a transition strategy, the Wolf Creek group put forward something new. An "energy royalty," or Btu (British thermal unit) tax, to be applied at the point of severance or extraction, would be imposed in gradually increasing amounts over several decades on all nonrenewable fuels, namely, gas, oil, coal, and uranium.

—LUTHER J. CARTER

*Members of the environmental agenda task force were Gerald O. Barney (coordinator), of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund staff; John H. Adams, Natural Resources Defense Council; David R. Brower, Friends of the Earth; George D. Davis, Wilderness Society; Robert T. Dennis, Zero Population Growth; Thomas L. Kimball, National Wildlife Federation; Ian C. T. Nisbet, Massachusetts Audubon Society; G. Jon Rousch, Nature Conservancy; Arlie Schardt, Environmental Defense Fund; Maitland S. Sharpe, Izaak Walton League of America; Anthony Wayne Smith, National Parks and Conservation Association; Elvis J. Stahr, National Audubon Society; and Paul Swatek, Sierra Club. The report, *The Unfinished Agenda: The Citizen's Policy Guide to Environmental Issues*, is available at $3.95 (paperback) from Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 666 Fifth Avenue, New York 10019.

†Available at no cost from the Georgia Conservancy, Suite 407, 3110 Maple Drive, Atlanta 30305. The others besides Lovins who took part in drafting the statement were James W. Benson, ERDA's solar energy division; Charles J. Cicchetti, University of Wisconsin; Herman Daly, Louisiana State University; Denis A. Hayes, Worldwatch Institute; Bruce M. Hannon, University of Illinois; Eugene P. Odum, University of Georgia; David W. Orr, University of North Carolina; and Cecil R. Phillips, Georgia Conservancy.