

## Robert Thorne: Controversial Nominee for Energy R & D Job

A vitally important job in the new Department of Energy (DOE) is that of the assistant secretary for energy technology, who will spend about one-fourth of DOE's \$10-billion annual budget and bear responsibility for energy research and development. But the White House nominee for this position, Robert D. Thorne—who during most of the past 5 years has headed the Energy Research and Development Administration's (and the old AEC's) San Francisco Operations Office—can look forward to a rocky beginning.

Some environmental and public interest groups are already objecting to his nomination on the grounds that, during the months preceding California's nuclear ballot initiative in June of 1976, he engaged in "political hatchet work." As a consequence, members of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources may put Thorne—who since February has been ERDA's acting assistant administrator for nuclear energy—through a wringer in his confirmation hearings later this month.

"He has got a lot of problems related to the nuclear initiative campaign," says Chris Burke, a legislative assistant to Senator John A. Durkin (D-N.H.), a member of the committee. Burke says that Durkin—mindful of how poorly the Senate has performed in reviewing the backgrounds of some nominees in the past—will make it a particular point to see that Thorne's record is thoroughly scrutinized. An aide to Senator Floyd K. Haskell (D-Colo.), another member of the committee, says that Haskell also is familiar with the complaints about Thorne and will be present at the hearings to see that they are publicly aired.

The Thorne nomination is not likely to be rejected by the Senate or withdrawn by the Carter Administration, for rarely does a confirmation hearing lead to so dramatic a denouement. But it is clear that Thorne is going to have some explaining to do.

### Distributing "Pronuclear Propaganda"

One question that will surely be put to him is how it was that nearly 29,000 copies of *Shedding Light*—an ERDA pamphlet on nuclear energy that has been termed "pronuclear propaganda" by the General Accounting Office—were distributed through his San Francisco Operations Office before the nuclear ballot initiative.

Another likely question is, Why did the office not only set up a speakers' bureau prior to the initiative but also send out some 500 "invitations" encouraging civic clubs, chambers of commerce, Farm Bureau groups, teachers associations, and the like, to ask ERDA for speakers? Thorne may also be called on to defend the economic impact report issued by his office which said that, if the initiative passed, Californians would have to bear the burden of \$40 billion in extra energy costs over the next 20 years.

"Given the political hatchet work he has engaged in in California, Thorne is not deserving of so important a position as assistant secretary for energy technology," says Terry Lash, a staff scientist in the Palo Alto office of the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental law group. "He is seen as single-mindedly pronuclear. What we need in this position is somebody who enjoys the confidence of all sides [in the debate over alternative energy technologies]."

According to Thorne, allegations of this kind do him a

gross injustice. In an interview with *Science*, he said that the decision to publish the pamphlet *Shedding Light* was made in 1975 despite the objections he had raised to it while on an earlier temporary tour in Washington as head of nuclear energy R & D.

"I said it was a dumb idea," he recalls, but concedes that he had not felt strongly enough about the pamphlet to try to keep it from being distributed through the San Francisco office. As for the speakers' bureau, he insists that it was set up in response to an overwhelming public demand and that the speakers discussed energy issues in a fair and objective manner. The economic impact report, he said, was prepared at the request of the Federal Reserve Bank in San Francisco and ultimately reviewed and published by the bank.

In reply to the more general charge that he has a strong pronuclear bias, Thorne said that he worked effectively at pushing the solar, geothermal, and conservation projects for which the San Francisco office had management responsibilities. He expressed particular pride in the *Pacific Regional Solar Heating Handbook* prepared for the office by the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory.

Congress Watch, the Capitol Hill lobbying group organized by Ralph Nader, and a number of other public interest groups such as the Sierra Club and the Environmental Policy Center, are disturbed about the Thorne appointment. Besides the allegations related to Thorne's California experience, the environmental lobbyists are looking into his performance last spring as chairman of the steering committee which he put together to carry out a technical review for the Carter Administration of the Clinch River breeder reactor project.

According to Frank Von Hippel of Princeton University, who was a member of the steering committee, Thorne was "chairman in name only," presiding passively and ineffectually while breeder proponents and opponents talked past one another and arrived at no consensus whatever on whether the Clinch River project should be terminated. "He did little to structure or focus the debate," says Von Hippel. "I didn't feel he understood the substantive issues before the committee was convened, and I don't think he understood them afterwards."

Thorne says that he followed a calculated strategy of allowing everybody to vent their emotions. While it is true, he adds, that no agreement was reached on the Clinch River breeder, a consensus was arrived at on some matters—it was agreed, for instance, that there is no "proliferation proof" reactor technology.

Thorne says he accepted the DOE appointment at a personal sacrifice, for he wanted to go back to California where he could be near three of his children and his wife's elderly parents. "They twisted my arm," he says, the "they" referring to energy Secretary James R. Schlesinger and some of his staff.

In light of his reluctance to take the job and of the criticism the appointment was sure to arouse, why was Thorne chosen? "There are not that many managers in government service," he says, "I'm considered to be a doer, and I've been recognized with the highest government award for management [the Distinguished Service Award]. Among my peer group I'm considered to be the best manager of all."—LUTHER J. CARTER