The State of the Union? – Irradiated, Coaled, and All Fracked Up
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“I went down to Rio with absolutely no expectations that anything of substance would be achieved. And I returned having all my expectations met.”
--environmental delegate to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit—

I suppose the same could be said concerning President Barack Obama’s second State of the Union message regarding energy policy.

Last year the President stunned the environmental community by unveiling a “green economy” based on three energy pillars – clean coal, off-shore oil drilling, and clean safe nuclear power.

Within weeks of the address the first pillar collapsed – literally – on 29 coal miners at the Upper Big Branch Massey Mine in West Virginia. Two days before Earth Day, BP strictly adhered to its corporate mission of "bringing oil to America's shores" by creating the Gulf disaster. Mercifully, we did not see Obama's third pillar -- nuclear power -- come crashing down on the Nation in 2010.

So this year, we were all prepared for – more of the same. And got it, in abundance.

Defining nuclear power (as well as coal and natural gas) this year as “clean,” it seems that the President still considers 'irradiated' as an acceptable “state of the Union:”

“Some folks want wind and solar. Others want nuclear, clean coal, and natural gas. To meet this goal, we will need them all – and I urge Democrats and Republicans to work together to make it happen,” the President said. Like on – health care, for example.

To “win the future” with his “clean energy sources,” the President would “give utilities the flexibility to generate clean energy wherever makes the most sense, all clean sources – including renewables, nuclear power, efficient natural gas, and coal with carbon capture and sequestration – would count toward the goal” of 80% “clean” sources by 2035.

While the tradition among the “small people” to wish upon a star, hope for a pony for Christmas, or blow out candles in anticipation of getting something neat is indulged in youth, the expectation is that, eventually, the real world will impose its unyielding conditions on us, and we will mature, grow up.

But, to maintain this same tradition in the guise of a national energy policy is simply – catastrophic.
While there are many flaws in the President’s expectation and selection of business-as-usual energy somehow delivering the goods, several stand out head and shoulders above the rest:

1.) Nuclear power, natural gas, and even coal with carbon capture and sequestration are NOT “clean”.

The President’s SoU did not explain how the $1 billion-plus clean up of the leaking West Valley, NY, radioactive waste dump is “clean.” Nor the plans to mine uranium in the Grand Canyon area. Nor the continued leaks of tritium at numerous US nuclear reactors. Nor the 60,000 metric tons – and growing – pile of high-level radioactive wastes the nation’s reactors have already produced, with more on the way and no place to dispose of it, if the President gets his way.

The President’s SoU did not explain how getting coal by removing entire mountain tops, destroying not only the watersheds and valleys below, but entire communities and their way of life is “clean” -- even if ALL the carbon is “captured”. Which can’t happen yet, because we haven’t invented a cost-effective technology to do that. Would the 29 miners who died in the Massey West Virginia disaster in 2010 be any more alive if they were mining “clean coal”?

And the President’s SoU did not explain how getting natural gas by force-fracturing rock formations while simultaneously polluting ground water resources is a “clean energy source.”

He did say – in another part of his speech -- that we would “pick projects based on what’s best for the economy, not politicians.”

Perhaps, this is simply a matter of Ivy League rivalry -- the Harvard Man President vs. the Princeton professor who warned, “You can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” Or technology, for that matter.

So, “clean” – these resources are not.

2.) You REALLY can’t afford it all, Mr. President!

But the second major problem with the President’s wish list lies with its scope. Simply put – while it is always nice to want to keep all options “on the table,” one cannot afford to; nor does one need to.

The most devastating analogy to keeping nuclear power “on the table” comes from former Nuclear Regulatory Commissioner Peter Bradford, who says,

“Those who assert that the problem of climate change is so urgent that — we have to do everything (or, another popular substitute for serious thought, — seek silver birdshot, not silver bullets) overlook the fact that we can never afford to do everything. The urgency of
world hunger doesn’t compel us to fight it with caviar, no matter how nourishing fish eggs might be. Spending large sums on elegant solutions (especially those with side effects) that provide little relief will diminish what we can spend on more promising approaches.”

Removing the urgency of the “problem of climate change” – as many Republicans will be wont to do – makes the warning even stronger; especially when you also just announce a 5-year freeze on federal discretionary spending, as the President did in the SoU.

The current numbers for “new nuclear” (now greater than some forms of solar power!) simply do NOT justify their inclusion in the same room, let alone on the same table as traditionally perceived renewable energy resources – elegance aside. The cross-over point was reached last summer, when new nuclear costs exceeded those for solar photovoltaic power.

Whether in a climate crisis or a budget crisis, the rule of thumb has to be: set priorities on what’s most likely to work, or already working well, or that which will require the least cost incurred to implement. In each case currently available renewable energy resources beat new nuclear power hands down.

One thing the President did manage to get right: “We do BIG things!” he reminded us. Like – the Massey Mine disaster, the BP Gulf spill, followed promptly by two Enbridge oil pipeline breaks in the Great Lakes Basin, the Yucca Mt. high-level radioactive waste dump fiasco, our failure to move on climate change. I suppose one could add Afghanistan and the Wall Street bailouts to the mix, but that would be piling on.

Perhaps instead of merely talking big, for once in our rapacious existence we dedicated our selves to a truly innovative effort to get us off of all nuclear and fossil fuels – say, by the year 2040, like Dr. Arjun Makhijani of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research tells we can do, cost effectively – well now, that would be something truly BIG! Something to hang the word “legacy” on, if not a re-election bid.

But no. Once again President Obama manages to underwhelm. All expectations firmly not met, two years running, as expected. Having the opportunity to launch truly innovative and transformational energy programs and resources, he instead opts for status quo illusions, as if linguistics were any better a choice for a national energy policy than, say, wishing on a star.

The state of the Union for now will remain – irradiated.

Nuclear Energy Information Service is a 30 year old anti-nuclear, pro safe-energy environmental organization based in Chicago, IL – President Obama’s old stomping grounds. Contact us at: www.neis.org; neis@neis.org

1 State of the Union Address, January 25, 2011
2 Fact Sheet, “State of the Union Clean Energy Standard”
State of the Union Address, January 25, 2011

“Honey, I Shrank the Renaissance: Nuclear Revival, Climate Change, and Reality,” Electricity Policy.com, October 11, 2010

“Nuclear Startup NuScale Suspends Operation,” GreenTechMedia, Jan. 21, 2011