

By Karl Grossman

Is there any chance that President Barack Obama can return to his long-held stand critical of nuclear power? Is he open to hearing from scientists and energy experts, such as Amory Lovins, who can refute the pro-nuclear arguments that have apparently influenced him?

Obama's declaration in his State of the Union speech on January 27 about "building a new generation of safe, clean nuclear power plants in this country" marked a significant change for him. His announcement Tuesday on moving ahead on \$8.3 billion in federal government loan guarantees to build new nuclear plants and increasing the loan guarantee fund to \$54.5 billion was a further major step. Wall Street is reluctant to invest money in the dangerous and extremely expensive technology.

Before taking office, including as a candidate for president, Obama not only was negative about atomic energy but—unusual for a politician—indicated a detailed knowledge of its threat to life.

"I start off with the premise that nuclear energy is not optimal and so I am not a nuclear energy proponent," Obama said at a campaign stop in Newton, Iowa on December 30, 2007. "My general view is that until we can make certain that nuclear power plants are safe, that they have solved the storage problem—because I'm opposed to Yucca Mountain and just dumping...in one state, in Nevada particularly, since there's potentially an earthquake line there—until we solve those problems and the whole nuclear industry can show that they can produce clean, safe energy without enormous subsidies from the U.S. government, I don't think

that's the best option. I am much more interested in solar and wind and bio-diesel and strategies [for] alternative fuels.”

As he told the editorial board of the *Keene Sentinel* in New Hampshire on November 25, 2007: “I don't think there's anything that we inevitably dislike about nuclear power. We just dislike the fact that it might blow up...and irradiate us...and kill us. That's the problem.”

Yes, that's the big problem with splitting the atom—one that has existed since the start of nuclear power and will always be inherent in the technology. Using the perilous process of fission to generate electricity with its capacity for catastrophic accidents and its production of highly toxic radioactive poisons called nuclear waste will always be unsafe. And it is unnecessary considering the safe energy technologies now available, from solar, wind and other clean sources.

Just how dangerous it is has been underlined in a book just published by the New York Academy of Sciences, *Chernobyl: Consequences of the Catastrophe for People and the Environment*. Written by a team of scientists led by noted Russian biologist Dr. Alexey Yablokov, using health data that have become available since the 1986 accident, it concludes that the fatality total “from April 1986 to the end of 2004 from the Chernobyl catastrophe was estimated at 985,000 additional [cancer] deaths.” This is in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and other countries where Chernobyl's poisons fell. The toll, they relate, continues to rise.

Chernobyl was a different design from the nuclear plants which the U.S., France and Japan seek now to build but disasters can also happen involving these plants and they, too, produce the highly toxic nuclear waste poisons. The problem is fission itself. It's no way to produce electricity.

Obama has been aware of this. As he stated at a Londonderry, New Hampshire town meeting on October 7, 2007: “Nuclear power has a host of problems that have not been solved. We haven’t solved the storage situation effectively. We have not dealt with all of the security aspects of our nuclear plants and nuclear power is very expensive.”

He still left the door open to it. His Energy Plan as a candidate stated: “It is unlikely that we can meet our aggressive climate goals if we eliminate nuclear power from the table. However, there is no future for expanded nuclear without first addressing four key issues: public right-to-know, security of nuclear fuel and waste, waste storage, and [nuclear weapons] proliferation.”

In his first year as president, nuclear power proponents worked to influence him. Among nuclear opponents, there has been anxiety regarding Obama’s two top aides, both of whom have been involved with what is now the utility operating more nuclear power plants than any other in the United States, Exelon.

Rahm Emanuel, now Obama’s chief of staff, as an investment banker was in the middle of the \$8.2 billion merger in 1999 of Unicom, the parent company of Commonwealth Edison of Chicago, and Peco Energy to put together Exelon. David Axelrod, now a senior Obama advisor and formerly chief campaign strategist, was an Exelon consultant. Candidate Obama received sizeable contributions from Exelon executives including from John Rowe, its president and chief executive officer who in 2007 also became chairman of the Nuclear Energy Institute, the U.S. nuclear industry’s main trade group.

It’s not only been nuclear opponents who have seen a link between Exelon and the Obama administration. *Forbes* magazine, in its January 18th issue, in an article on John Rowe and how he has “focused the company on nuclear,” displayed a sidebar headlined, “The

President's Utility." It read: "Ties are tight between Exelon and the Obama administration," noting Exelon political contributions and featuring Emanuel and Axelrod with photos and descriptions of their Exelon connections.

The *Forbes* article spoke of how last year "Emanuel e-mailed Rowe on the eve of the House vote on global warming legislation and asked that he reach out to some uncommitted Democrats. 'We are proud to be the President's utility,' says Elizabeth Moler, Exelon's chief lobbyist," the article went on. "It's nice for John to be able to go to the White House and they know his name."

Chicago-based Exelon's website boasts of its operating "the largest nuclear fleet in the nation and the third largest in the world." It owns 17 nuclear power plants which "represent approximately 20 percent of the U.S. nuclear industry's power capacity."

The climate change or global warming issue is another factor in Obama's change on nuclear power. An Associated Press article of January 31 on Obama's having "singled out nuclear power in his State of the Union address and his spending plan for the next budget," began: "President Barack Obama is endorsing nuclear energy like never before, trying to win over Republicans and moderate Democrats on climate and energy legislation."

MSNBC's Mike Stuckey on February 9 reported about "Obama's new support for nuclear power, which some feel may be a down payment for Republican backing on a climate change bill."

After the "safe, clean nuclear power" claim, Michael Mariotte, executive director of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service, declared: "Politically, Obama likely was simply parroting the effort being led by Senators John Kerry, Joe Lieberman and Lindsay Graham to gain support for a climate bill by adding massive subsidies for nuclear power, offshore oil and

‘clean’ coal. But recycling George W. Bush energy talking points is no way to solve the climate crisis or develop a sustainable energy policy...Indeed, Obama knows better. Candidate Obama understood that nuclear power is neither safe nor clean.”

Climate change has been used by those promoting a “revival” of nuclear power—there hasn’t been a new nuclear plant ordered and built in the U.S. in 37 years—as a new argument. In fact, nuclear power makes a substantial contribution to global warming considering the overall “nuclear cycle”—uranium mining and milling, conversion, enrichment, fuel fabrication and the disposition of radioactive waste, and so on.

Climate change is also one argument for pushing atomic energy of another major influence on Obama on nuclear power, Steven Chu, his Department of Energy secretary. Chu typifies the religious-like zeal for nuclear power emanating for decades from scientists in the U.S. government’s string of national nuclear laboratories. Chu was director of one of these, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, before becoming head of DOE.

First established during World War II’s Manhattan Project to build atomic weapons, the laboratories after the war began promoting civilian nuclear technology—and have been pushing it unceasingly ever since. It has been a way to perpetuate the vested interest created during World War II. The number of nuclear weapons that could be built was limited because atomic bombs don’t lend themselves to commercial distribution, but in pushing food irradiation, nuclear-powered airplanes and rockets, atomic devices for excavation and, of course, nuclear power, the budgets and staffs of the national nuclear laboratories could be maintained, indeed increase.

That was the analysis of David Lilienthal, first chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, which preceded the Department of Energy. Lilienthal in his 1963 book *Change*,

Hope, and the Bomb wrote: “The classic picture of the scientist as a creative individual, a man obsessed, working alone through the night, a man in a laboratory pushing an idea—this has changed. Now scientists are ranked in platoons. They are organization men. In many cases the independent and humble search for new truths about nature has been confused with the bureaucratic impulse to justify expenditure and see that next year’s budget is bigger than last’s.”

Lilienthal wrote about the “elaborate and even luxurious [national nuclear] laboratories that have grown up at Oak Ridge, Argonne, Brookhaven” and the push to use nuclear devices for “blowing out harbors, making explosions underground to produce steam, and so on” which show “how far scientists and administrators will go to try to establish a nonmilitary use” for nuclear technology.

Chu, like so many of the national nuclear laboratory scientists and administrators, minimizes the dangers of radioactivity. If they didn’t, if they acknowledged how life-threatening the radiation produced by nuclear technology is, their favorite technology would crumble.

A major theme of Chu, too, is a return to the notion promoted by the national nuclear laboratories in the 1950s and 60s of “recycling” and “reusing” nuclear waste. This way, they have hoped, it might not be seen as waste at all. The concept was to use radioactive Cesium-137 (the main poison discharged in the Chernobyl disaster) to irradiate food, to use depleted uranium to harden bullets and shells, and so on. In recent weeks, with Obama carrying out his pledge not to allow Yucca Mountain to become a nuclear waste dump, Chu set up a “blue-ribbon” panel on radioactive waste—stacked with nuclear power advocates including Exelon’s John Rowe—that is expected to stress the “recycling” theory.

“We are aggressively pursuing nuclear energy,” declared Chu in January as he announced DOE’s budget plan—which included an increase in the 2011 federal budget in monies for

nuclear loan guarantees to build new nuclear plants cited by Obama Tuesday. “We are, as we have repeatedly said, working hard to restart the American nuclear power industry.”

The \$8.3 billion in loan guarantees Obama announced Tuesday is to come from \$18.5 billion in guarantees proposed by the George W. Bush administration and authorized by Congress in 2005. “My budget proposes tripling the loan guarantees we provide to help finance safe, clean nuclear facilities,” said Obama Tuesday, referring to the DOE plan which would add \$36 billion and bring the loan guarantee fund to \$54.5. And this despite candidate Obama warning about “enormous subsidies from the U.S. government” to the nuclear industry.

The \$8.3 billion in loan guarantees is to go toward the Southern Company of Atlanta constructing two nuclear power reactors in Burke, Georgia. These are to be AP1000 nuclear power plants designed by the Westinghouse nuclear division (now owned by Toshiba) although in October the designs were rejected by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission as likely being unable to withstand events like tornadoes and earthquakes.

Obama’s change of stance on nuclear power has led to an earthquake of its own politically. MoveOn, the nonprofit advocacy group that has raised millions of dollars for Democratic candidates including Obama, gauged sentiment of his State of the Union speech by having 10,000 MoveOn members record their views. Every few seconds they pressed a button signaling their reactions—ranging from “great” to “awful.” When Obama got his line on energy, the overwhelming judgment was awful. “The most definitive drop in enthusiasm is when President Obama talked about nuclear power and offshore drilling,” said Ilyse Hogue, MoveOn’s director of political advocacy. “They’re looking for clean energy sources that prioritize wind and solar.”

“Safe, clean nuclear power—it’s an oxymoron,” said Jim Riccio, nuclear policy analyst for Greenpeace USA. “The president knows better. Just because radiation is invisible doesn’t mean it’s clean.”

“From a health perspective, the proposal of the Obama administration to increase federal loan guarantees for new nuclear reactors poses a serious risk to Americans,” said Joseph Mangano, executive director of the Radiation and Public Health Project. “Adding new reactors will raise the chance for a catastrophic meltdown. It will also increase the amount of radioactive chemicals routinely emitted from reactors into the environment—and human bodies. New reactors will raise rates of cancer—which are already unacceptably high—especially to infants and children. Public policies affecting America’s energy future should reduce, rather than raise, hazards to our citizens.”

As to government loan guarantees, “The last thing Americans want is another government bailout for a failing industry, but that’s exactly what they’re getting from the Obama administration,” said Ben Schreiber, the climate and energy tax analyst of Friends of the Earth.

“It would be not only good policy but good politics for Obama to abandon the nuclear loan guarantee program,” said Mariotte of NIRS.

After Obama’s Tuesday declaration on loan guarantees, Paul Gunter, director of the Reactor Oversight Project of the organization Beyond Nuclear, said: “Unfortunately, the president’s decision is fuel for opposition to costly and dangerous nuclear power. It signals a widening of a divide as the administration steps back from its promise for a change in energy policy and those of us who are committed to a change.”

“We are deeply disturbed by President Obama’s decision,” said Peter Wilk, executive director of Physicians for Social Responsibility. “Not only does this put taxpayers on the hook

for billions, it prioritizes a dirty, dangerous, and expensive technology over public health. From the beginning to the end of the nuclear fuel cycle, nuclear reactors remain a serious threat to public health and safety. From uranium mining waste to operating reactors leaking radioactivity to the lack of radioactive waste solutions, nuclear power continues to pose serious public health threats.”

Nuclear opponents have been disappointed in a lack of access to the Obama White House of those with a critical view on nuclear power—who could counteract the pro-nuclear arguments that Obama has been fed. Will President Obama open himself to hearing from those who question nuclear power?

Obama has credibility trouble already. *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert wrote on January 26: “Who is Barack Obama? Americans are still looking for the answer...Mr. Obama may be personally very appealing, but he has positioned himself all over the political map...Mr. Obama is in danger of being perceived as someone whose rhetoric, however skillful, cannot always be trusted. He is creating a credibility gap for himself, and if it widens much more he won't be able to close it.”

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Karl Grossman, journalism professor at the State University of New York/College at Old Westbury, is the author of the books *Cover Up: What You Are Not Supposed to Know About Nuclear Power* and *Power Crazy* and narrator and host of numerous TV programs on nuclear technology including *Three Mile Island Revisited* and *The Push to Revive Nuclear Power* (www.envirovideo.com).