

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

***Spin Doctor Strangelove,
or How We Learned
to Love the Bomb***
page 5

***Showdown in Glitter
Gulch: Nevada Bets
Against Nuclear Waste***
page 9

***Temporary Storage
of Permanent Waste:
the Nukem Strategy***
page 11

NUKING THE MESSENGERS

by John C. Stauber and Sheldon Rampton

High-level waste from every nuclear power plant in the country is set to hit the nation's highways two years from now, headed for a Nevada storage dump that will *probably never be built*. Almost no one in the United States even knows the plan is in the works. On December 13, the day Congress was scheduled to vote on the plan, a reporter for National Public Radio in Utah was shocked to learn for the first time that the plan existed, and that 92% of the waste is slated to travel by truck or train through her state.

No wonder the U.S. Department of Energy is keeping close tabs on the news media.

In Nevada, the one state in the union where the nuclear disposal plan is a topic of frequent debate, journalists expressed both anger and amusement at the recent disclosure that they were rated among the most negative reporters in the country in a DOE-funded PR study aimed at identifying friends and enemies of the department and of Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary.

continued on next page

FLACK ATTACK

The Hazel O'Leary flap prompted another round of grumbling in the PR industry about the "bad rap" that the industry keeps getting.

Minneapolis PR pro Paul Maccabee penned a complaint about what he called a "volcanic explosion of media lava," arguing that "O'Leary was wise to investigate how to get her department's message out" so that "news reporters can be held accountable for past stories. . . . A government agency without a PR staff is an agency that has no voice in the newsroom, no finger on the pulse of its constituency."

The industry trade newsletter, *Inside PR*, weighed in with an editorial that took a passing swipe at *PR Watch*, arguing that the attack on O'Leary is "no different in nature from . . . critics like John Stauber, who see cynical and reprehensible manipulation in the most innocent, common sense communications strategy."

In fact, the O'Leary episode shows that a lot of people share our dim view of the PR industry, and we find it remarkable that this fact is so slow to penetrate the consciousness of an industry that brags incessantly about its communications skills.

Inside PR's defense of DOE's approach to communications will get little support from Professor Craig Walton, who directs the Institute for Ethics and Policy Studies at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. Walton is currently writing a book about DOE's attempt to implement a law passed by Congress in 1987 that would force the Yucca Mountain site in Nevada to become the country's sole repository for high-level nuclear waste.

Known locally as the "Screw Nevada Bill," the law is opposed by over 70% of Nevadans. "We were selected to be the victim," Walton said. "It's a grisly lifeboat ethic. . . . You have to throw somebody overboard, and Nevada was selected to be it because we were outnumbered."

To overcome local resistance, the nuclear power industry has funded a multi-million-dollar PR blitz, code-named the "Nevada Initiative." Walton says the industry and DOE have "called in larger and larger advertising budgets, PR gimmicks such as bus tours and a nuclear boutique near our largest mall, and

continued on next page

To perform the rating, DOE turned to CARMA International, a private PR firm offering “computer aided research and media analysis.” CARMA pored over thousands of stories, compiling a numerical ranking for each based on the number of times a DOE-supplied list of “positive” and “negative” messages appeared. Positive messages included statements such as “the risk of public exposure from stored plutonium is extremely low.” Negative messages included “little progress is being made to clean up plutonium storage sites” and “DOE’s budget should be cut substantially.”

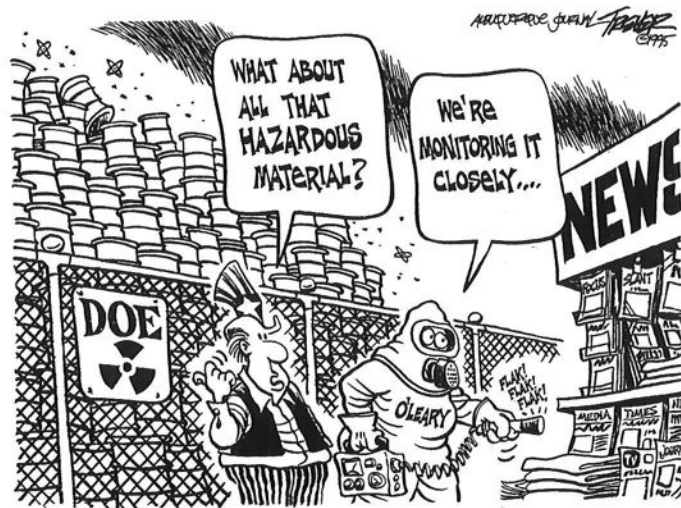
If a reporter’s stories contained too many “negative” themes, explained DOE press secretary Barbara Semedo, it meant that “we weren’t getting our message across, that we needed to work on this person a little.”

CARMA’s computerized ranking system rated the *Las Vegas Sun* the most negative paper in the country, while the second most negative ranking went to the other Vegas daily, the *Review Journal*.

“It’s like being named on Nixon’s enemy list,” said *Sun* reporter Mary Manning. “If I hadn’t been included, I’d have felt snubbed.”

WASTING NEVADA

Nevada’s nuclear war began in 1986, when DOE announced that it was considering Nevada, Texas and Washington state as possible disposal sites for the country’s high-level nuclear waste. The governors of all three states responded immediately with lawsuits challenging the decision. In 1987, House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Texas) and Senate Majority Leader Tom Foley (D-Washington) pushed legislation through Congress



©1995 John Trever, *Albuquerque Journal*.
Reprinted by permission.

eliminating their states from consideration, leaving Yucca Mountain, Nevada as the only remaining candidate.

According to the Nuclear Waste Policy Act passed by Congress in 1982, US nuclear power plants pay a tax in exchange for which DOE is committed to accept and dispose of their waste beginning in 1998. In practice, delays and cost overruns have made it impossible to build a permanent waste repository by this deadline. Currently the most optimistic projections envision completion of the *feasibility study* for Yucca Mountain by the year 2006. The estimated cost of the study alone has soared nearly 100-fold, from \$80 million to over \$6 billion.

Meanwhile, US nuclear plants are running out of on-site storage space and are becoming increasingly alarmed at the prospect that they will get stuck with the full bill for disposal of their waste. Utility companies are press-

FLACK ATTACK *continued from page 1*

public meetings where they prepare cutaway models, charts, handouts and toy trains, bring engineers and scientists, and condescendingly characterize citizen distrust as springing from lack of scientific understanding. . . . Public participation has degenerated to cynicism in southern Nevada, precisely because of such manipulation of what the DOE sees as emotional but clueless consumers of their policy.”

Inside PR would probably argue that DOE’s approach is simply an “innocent, common sense communications strategy.” The problem is that it is a strategy for *one-way* communication—a propaganda model aimed at compelling obedience rather than at discovering and honoring the wishes of its “target population.”

“PR has become a corporate substitute for honesty and public dialogue, with ethical and political implications that reach far beyond the moral meltdown at Yucca Mountain,” Walton says. “If you pay attention, you see a host of indicators, ranging from opinion polls to the growth of militias, indicating that the whole legitimacy of the United States may be coming undone. There was a time when the United States was widely perceived to be governing by the consent of the governed. That’s gone now. Whole segments of the population have written off the notion that the government represents the people. If you say that, they just laugh in your face. And if you look at the way the spin doctors have manipulated and mishandled the Yucca Mountain debate, you understand why people feel this way.”

ing Congress to take the waste off their hands sooner rather than later.

“This is the government. If they start making lists of reporters they don’t like, we have to worry about the FBI, the CIA and the IRS.”

—Mary Manning, *Las Vegas Sun*

Prior to becoming Energy Secretary, Hazel O’Leary was one of the utility executives who lobbied Congress. As vice president of Minnesota-based Northern States Power Company, one of the nation’s major nuclear utilities, O’Leary told Congress in 1992 that companies needed fast relief from the waste disposal problem so they could afford to build new reactors. “It is not reasonable to assume that responsible business people will risk billions of dollars of customers’ money to invest in new nuclear plants when there is no place to store spent fuel,” she argued. “Together we must assure that a permanent facility or a temporary facility is developed.”

The new plan, based on this imperative, is laid out in legislation sponsored by Senator Larry Craig (R-Idaho) and Representative Fred Upton (R-Michigan). It slashes funding for the feasibility study at Yucca Mountain, but directs DOE to begin shipping waste there anyway beginning in 1998 as originally scheduled. Instead of burial below ground, the waste will be stacked in above-ground silos.

“They’re calling it a temporary repository, but obviously the main goal is to ship it to Nevada and pretend that the problem has been solved,” says Judy Treichel, who directs the Nevada Nuclear Waste Task Force, a public interest organization promoting citizen involvement in nuclear waste decisions.

“In reality,” Treichel says, “the only beneficiaries from this approach will be the utility companies. Taxpayers take over responsibility for their waste so they can go on producing more. Rather than solving the problem of nuclear waste, it actually makes the problem worse.”

OPRAH O’LEARY?

Upon taking office as Energy Secretary, O’Leary vowed to move fast on “resolving” the storage problem, arguing that the federal government has a “moral obligation” to take the nuclear waste off the hands of utility companies by 1998.

During her tenure, O’Leary has placed an unusually strong emphasis on public relations. “She’s all showbiz,” said one longtime DOE official, speaking anonymously. Her high profile and polished public presence even prompted the *Nation* to nickname her “Oprah O’Leary.”

According to Douglas Elmers, who served as DOE’s press secretary in the last years of the Reagan Administration, this emphasis on public relations was aimed at repairing the Department’s negative image, a legacy of the years when its predecessor agency, the Atomic Energy Commission, routinely lied about its nuclear activities in the name of national security.

PR WATCH

Published Quarterly

Address Correspondence to:

Center for Media & Democracy

3318 Gregory Street, Madison, WI 53711

Phone: 608-233-3346; Fax: 608-238-2236

Internet: 74250.735@compuserve.com

©1995 by the Center for Media & Democracy
All Rights Reserved. For permission to reprint articles, contact the above address.

Executive Director and Editor: John C. Stauber

Associate Editor: Sheldon Rampton

Board of Directors: Linda Jameson, Joseph Mendelson, David Merritt, Scott Robbe and Debra Schwarze

Subscription Rates:

- Businesses: \$200/year
- Non-Profit Groups: \$60/year
- Journalists and Individuals: \$35/year

Also available from PR Watch:

- “Counter-PR” Research
- Speakers & Seminars
- Newsletter and Brochure Production
- Writing, Editing and Graphic Design

Printed on chlorine-free, 100% recycled paper.

“Far more than her predecessors,” Elmers said, O’Leary “came to the realization that if you don’t have the public on your side, or the media on your side, for that matter, you’re going to have a very difficult time getting the cleanup going.”

Early in her tenure, O’Leary won praise for her willingness to disclose information about the Atomic Energy Commission’s radiation experiments on unwitting human subjects. To revamp her department’s image and downplay its past association with military uses of nuclear power, she ordered DOE’s Washington offices to remove photographs of battleships and nuclear weapons facilities, replacing them with pictures of successes in wind- and solar-powered electricity. The politically-correct facelift also included the hiring of several environmentalists to key jobs and the naming of seven women and five blacks among her first 15 top-level appointments.

“We’re very pleased.”

—Edwin Theisen, Hazel O’Leary’s former boss at Northern States Power

But environmentalists have criticized O’Leary’s approach to the waste problem, accusing her of moving too hastily to accommodate the utilities. In 1994, for example, she rejected calls for a blue-ribbon commission to review the Yucca Mountain program. An independent review, she said, would further delay studies of the mountain and “would be insane against this lingering, ever-lengthening timetable.”

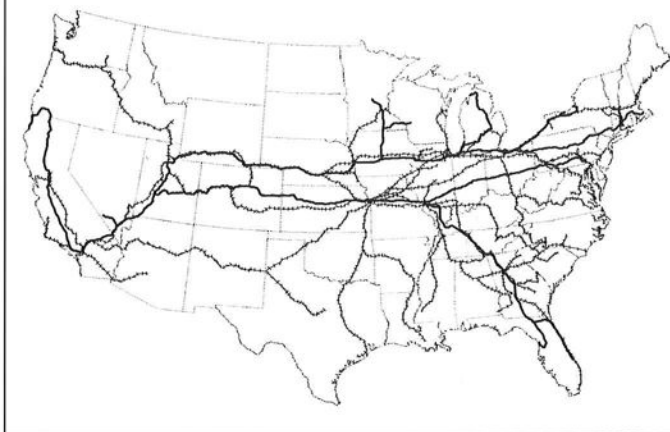
“We’re very pleased,” said Edwin Theisen, O’Leary’s former boss at Northern States Power, praising her handling of the waste issue. “Just knowing Hazel as well as I do, if she can’t get it done, it’s not going to happen.”

MAKEOVER MELTDOWN

After the CARMA story broke, O’Leary attempted to distance herself from the decision to hire an outside media tracking service, claiming that she “knew little about the details of the system that was planned.” In fact, computerized media tracking was one of the recommendations in a 28-page “communications plan” developed for O’Leary by Audrey Hoffer, a PR consultant hired by DOE in 1993.

The plan outlined a strategy for transforming O’Leary from the “best kept secret in the Clinton administration” into a “household name,” and advised systematic monitoring of when DOE or O’Leary are covered, “by which

Planned Shipping Routes for Delivery of Nuclear Waste to Yucca Mountain, Nevada



Source: Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects Nuclear Waste Project Office, Carson City, Nevada.

publication outlets . . . and if the tone is generally positive or negative. We need to know precisely by day, week and month who has reported on . . . the secretary.”

CARMA made its own attempt at spin control after the story broke, conducting a quick analysis of how the flap itself was treated by the media and issuing the results in a news release. Although CARMA’s analysis showed that 77% of media reports on the incident were “unfavorable,” it argued that “coverage was not overwhelmingly negative,” pointing out that CARMA itself “earned a 40 favorability rating” on a scale of 0 to 100.

CARMA also said O’Leary had put a positive spin on the incident with her statement that there had been “no enemies list, no gumshoes, no investigation,” but the *Las Vegas Sun*’s Mary Manning remained unconvinced.

“If private companies want to hire a PR firm to monitor the media, that’s one thing,” Manning said, “but this is the government. If they start making lists of reporters they don’t like so they can ‘work on us a little,’ we have to worry about the fact that they control the police, the FBI, the CIA and the IRS.”

The incident was disturbing for another reason to Judy Treichel at the Nevada Nuclear Waste Task Force. Treichel said she was shocked to read newspaper accounts stating that, in addition to CARMA International, the Department of Energy employs 125 *internal* public relations staffers.

“That’s more DOE people than they have working on the high-level waste program,” Treichel said. “It tells you something about what their real priorities are.” ■

SPIN DOCTOR STRANGELove, OR HOW WE LEARNED TO LOVE THE BOMB

The symbiotic relationship between nuclear power and the PR industry began during World War II, when the U.S. effort to develop the atom bomb was still a top-secret war program code-named the Manhattan Project.

As “the Bomb” neared completion, the US turned to an elite group of public relations practitioners known as the “Wisemen.” With government security men guarding the doors, the Wisemen met with Major General Leslie Groves, chief of the Manhattan Project, at the University Club in New York City. Groves briefed them on the project and asked for advice on how to handle PR for the first bomb tests in New Mexico.

At their suggestion, the War Department invited *New York Times* reporter Bill Lawrence to observe the tests and to be the “pool reporter” relaying information from the bombings of Japan to other reporters the Army had assembled in Manila.

A SACRED MONOPOLY

The end of the war left the US with a new set of public relations concerns related to the bomb. The US held a monopoly on nuclear weapons and needed to assure people that it would use this awesome power in a responsible way. President Truman pledged to keep the bomb a “sacred trust” on behalf of all mankind. To oversee this trust, he proposed establishing a commission of Navy and Army officers to control and develop future nuclear technology.

Public opinion, however, was deeply affected by the bomb’s awesome destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the horrifying prospect of nuclear war provoked sharp debate and opposition to military control of nuclear weapons.

To answer these fears, the US formed a civilian Atomic Energy Commission, headed by physicist David Lilienthal. Previously, Lilienthal had served as chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority, and his role in the development of government-owned hydroelectric works had won him a reputation as a champion of the public interest against private monopolies. To dramatize the transfer of the bomb from military to civilian control, the AEC Public Relations Department arranged for a newspaper to photograph General Groves handing “the secret” to Chairman Lilienthal.

Lilienthal’s image as a civilian and a liberal made him an ideal spokesman for the military’s campaign to accelerate research and production of nuclear weapons. In testimony to Congress, he advocated “arming this country atomically in such a way as to erect a great deterrent to aggression in the world; that we should establish unquestioned and unmistakable leadership; and in this way thus buy time for reason to prevail.”

The myth of the bomb as a “secret weapon” quickly evaporated, however, as the Soviet Union developed bombs of its own. By 1952, both countries had graduated from A-bombs to H-bombs, yielding more than 15,000 times the destructive power of the explosion that obliterated Hiroshima. As US-Soviet hostilities hardened, the public was left to consider the horrifying potential that atomic power had unleashed—the prospect that the next “world war” would involve bombs capable of destroying whole cities in a war that even then people realized no one would win.

ATOMS FOR PEACE

In 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower delivered his now-famous “Atoms for Peace” speech to the United Nations. Using a swords-into-plowshares approach borrowed from the Bible, he pledged that “peaceful power from atomic energy is no dream of the future. That capability, already proved, is here—now, today,” ready to “provide abundant electrical energy in the power-starved areas of the world. . . . The US pledges . . . to help solve the fearful atomic dilemma—to devote its entire heart and mind to find the way by which the miraculous inventiveness of man shall not be dedicated to his death, but consecrated to his life.”

Eisenhower’s speech marked the beginning of a public relations campaign to transform the image of nuclear technology. Previously, its sole proven use had been for the purpose of designing destructive weapons. Now the US Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) promised that nuclear generators would make electricity “too cheap to meter.” The government’s monopoly on ownership of nuclear materials was abolished, and private companies were invited to participate in the commercial development of atomic energy. The US promised to share atomic energy technology with underdeveloped nations. The atom’s image as a magical source of unlimited energy was promoted using educational films, brochures and experts who promised that a lump of uranium the size of a pea could unleash enough energy to drive a car to the moon and back.

Less than a year following his “Atoms for Peace” speech, Eisenhower appeared on national television to personally lead a publicity stunt on Labor Day of 1954. Waving a “magic wand,” he electronically signalled a radio-controlled bulldozer to begin breaking ground at the small Pennsylvania town of Shippingport, marking the start of construction on the country’s first commercial nuclear power plant.

Once again, however, image and reality were worlds apart. Although scientists had already demonstrated the possibility of using nuclear reactors to generate electric-

ity, the technology had little support among US utility companies, who saw nuclear generators as expensive and unnecessary. In fact, the cost per kilowatt of electricity generated by the Shippingport reactor was ten times higher than the prevailing cost of power; federal subsidies were necessary to make it commercially competitive with conventional coal-powered reactors. The true purpose of Shippingport was symbolic; it sent a message that the atom *could* be harnessed for peaceful uses.

In 1950, David Lilienthal had resigned as AEC chairman. He became increasingly disillusioned with the “many instances of the way in which public relations techniques—the not-so-hidden persuader—have been used to promote the appropriation of funds for the peaceful Atom.” He criticized the “elaborate ritual” of providing nuclear technology to underdeveloped countries: “Even as a propaganda move it was self-defeating and naïve. A great many of these countries need and could use doctors and medicine, storage batteries, plows and fertilizers and seed—and good *elementary* scientific instruction. Only the desire to prove somehow that atoms were for peace could justify the absurdity of a separate program, not in the foreign aid part of the State Department but in the AEC.”

“Once a bright hope shared by all mankind, including myself, the rash proliferation of nuclear power plants is now one of the ugliest clouds hanging over America.”

—Dr. David Lilienthal, physicist, Nobel Prize Winner, first chairman of the US Atomic Energy Commission

By 1962, nuclear power was still more expensive than energy generated by conventional means, but the AEC and private companies such as Westinghouse, Union Carbide and General Electric had spent billions of dollars in research and development, and they were anxious to see a return on their investment. With great fanfare, GE announced in 1962 that it had contracted to build a nuclear plant at Oyster Creek, New Jersey, for \$91 million, entirely *without* federal subsidy.

In reality, however, the Oyster Creek reactor was a “loss leader.” General Electric built it at a bargain-basement price, accepting a loss on the deal so it could position itself to dominate the reactor market. The ploy worked. The mystique of high-tech atomic power proved hypnotic, and orders for new reactors began rolling in from utility companies convinced that they needed

nuclear power to remain on the cutting edge of “America’s energy future.”

As the orders came in, GE discreetly jacked up its prices, until utility companies were actually paying *more* for the privilege of “buying into the future” than if they had stayed with conventional generators.

DAMAGE CONTROL

As the rhetoric of power “too cheap to meter” faded, the AEC and nuclear advocates spoke instead of someday producing atomic electricity that would be “competitive in cost” to coal, gas or hydroelectric power. This goal was never achieved in practice. But even if nuclear power *could* be produced at a competitive price, the technology had another major problem: safety.

At a conventional power plant, an accident or sabotage might kill a few dozen people—a couple of hundred in a worst-case scenario. By contrast, a 1957 study by the Brookhaven National Laboratory estimated that a “worst case” accident at a small, 150-megawatt nuclear reactor 30 miles upwind of a major city would kill 3,400 people, injure another 43,000, and cause \$7 billion in property damage. An accident at a larger, 1,000-megawatt reactor could kill as many as 45,000 people, cause property damage of nearly \$300 billion, and radioactively contaminate an area the size of the state of Pennsylvania.

These estimates stunned the AEC steering committee which had commissioned the study. In an internal memorandum, steering committee member S. Allan Lough wrote that “Great care should be exercised . . . to avoid establishing and/or reinforcing the popular notion that reactors are unsafe. Though this is a public information or promotional problem that the AEC now faces with less than desirable success, I feel that by calculating the consequences of hypothetical accidents, the AEC should not place itself in the position of making the location of reactors near urban areas nearly indefensible.”

The steering committee decided to withhold publication of the Brookhaven study, and when word of its existence leaked out, the AEC responded by saying only that it had never been completed.

In fact, the industry had already seen a series of catastrophic incidents, most of which were successfully kept out of the press. As the years unrolled, new accidents kept happening:

- In Kyshtym in the Soviet Union, a massive radioactive explosion at a high-level waste dump in 1957 rendered an area of over 70 square miles permanently uninhabitable.

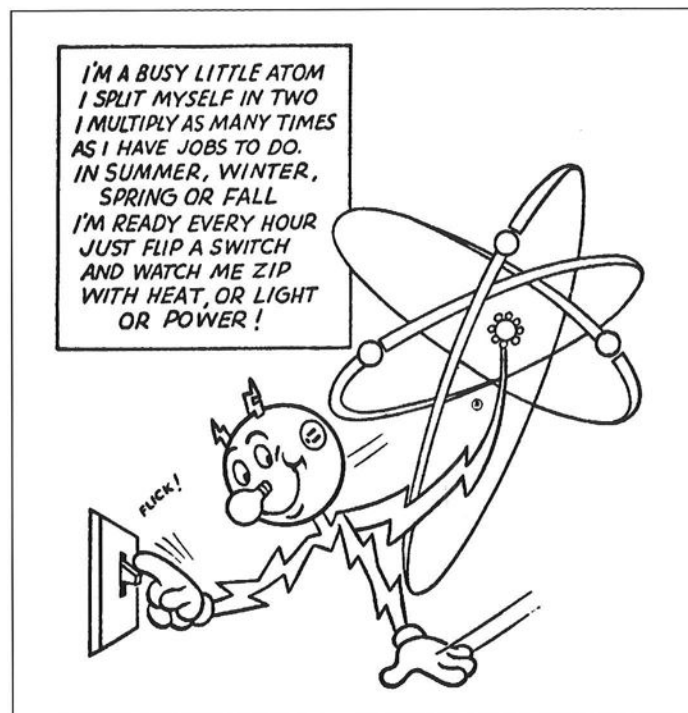
- At the SL-1 test reactor in Idaho, an exploding fuel rod killed three reactor operators and saturated the reactor building with radiation. Three weeks after the January 3, 1961, accident, the hands and heads of the three victims were still so hot with radiation that they had to be severed from their bodies and buried separately as radioactive waste.
- On October 5, 1966, a partial meltdown at the 300-megawatt Enrico Fermi I fast-breeder reactor at Monroe, Michigan prompted utility officials to seriously consider the possibility of trying to evacuate Detroit, 40 miles to the north. News of the accident was successfully withheld from the public until the early 1970s, when John G. Fuller, one of the engineers who witnessed the meltdown, published a book titled *We Almost Lost Detroit*.
- In 1975, fire damaged electric cables and safety systems at the Tennessee Valley Authority's Browns Ferry complex in Alabama. The fire triggered near panic in the plant's control room and started a process that could, if allowed to continue, have led to a meltdown.

CONTAINMENT FAILURE

Despite aggressive publicity efforts, the "peaceful atom" was never able to overcome its association with the nuclear weapons industry. The movement against nuclear power originated with the campaign against above-ground bomb testing, which educated citizens about the health and environmental dangers posed by radiation. Environmental concerns also fed the first local opposition to the building of nuclear power stations, when the Sierra Club in 1961 opposed construction of the Bodega Head plant near San Francisco on a site that was not only part of a local nature reserve, but also on an earthquake fault.

The activism of the 1960s led naturally to growing protests linking nuclear power to nuclear bombs, and by the late 1970s, "no-nuke" groups were active throughout the United States, lobbying and developing information programs which criticized the nuclear industry on environmental, scientific and economic grounds.

In response, electrical utilities stepped up their PR campaigns. A 1978 survey of business-funded educational materials in US public schools showed that "more than any industry group, the electric utilities provide extensive multi-media materials on energy issues. . . . These energy education efforts notably target the elementary grade levels through the use of films, comic books, cartoon graphics or simple phrasing. This emphasis on the lower grades seems aimed at cultivating a future



Reddy Kilowatt, General Electric's cartoon mascot, gives a poetic plug for plutonium in a free comic book for schoolkids titled "The Wonder World of Electricity."

constituency in support of the electric power industry in general and nuclear power in particular."

The educational cartoon books included titles such as *The Atom, Electricity, and You*, distributed by the Commonwealth Edison Company; *For A Mature Audience Only*, published by Westinghouse; and *Mickey Mouse and Goofy Explore Energy*, produced by Exxon.

The PR campaign attempted to portray nuclear power as not only safe, but environmentally cleaner than other power sources. In *The Story of Electricity*, published in 1975 by the Florida Power and Light Corporation, comic-book characters promised that "nuclear plants are clean, odorless and generate electricity economically . . . and most important, help *conserve fossil fuels!*"

Another comic book titled *The Battle for Survival—The War Against Environmental Pollution*, published by Virginia Electric & Power, claimed that "nuclear generating stations are just about the cleanest and most desirable neighbor that any community can have . . . and our power company is a leader in constructing these new plants!"

SPINNING OUT OF CONTROL

Despite decades of efforts to generate favorable publicity, the nuclear industry was strikingly unprepared to handle the image crisis that erupted in Pennsylvania on March 28, 1979, when control systems failed at the Three-Mile Island facility. According to Robert Dilenschneider, the Hill & Knowlton PR executive who was brought in to manage the crisis, "the miscommunication

at Three-Mile Island was the most monumental I have ever witnessed in business, and itself caused a crisis of epic proportions.”

By way of bad luck, public alarm was heightened by the ominously coincidental similarity of events at Three-Mile Island to the plot of a recently-released Hollywood movie, *The China Syndrome*, which portrayed a utility company more concerned with corporate profits and coverups than with serious safety problems. Metropolitan Edison, the company managing Three-Mile Island for parent company General Public Utilities, seemed to be reading from the same script as the film in its initial response to the discovery that its reactor was overheating.

The first rule of effective public relations in a crisis is to announce the bad news as completely and quickly as possible. Metropolitan Edison broke this rule in the first day of the crisis by attempting to evade the facts and downplay the extent of radiation released from the ailing reactor. Worse yet, Met Ed’s public-relations staff gave out contradictory and inaccurate information.

“There have been no recordings of any significant levels of radiation, and none are expected outside the plant,” said Met Ed’s chief spokesman, Don Curry. Shortly after this statement was released, Pennsylvania’s Department of Environmental Resources sent a helicopter over the plant with a geiger counter and detected radiation. Company officials backpedaled and said they didn’t know *how much* radiation had been released. Later that afternoon, they changed their position again and said the release was minor.

Company vice-president Jack Herbein became the perfect target for skeptical journalists, talking in technical jargon and losing his temper with reporters. When someone asked what might happen if the hydrogen bubble inside the reactor came in contact with a spark, he answered that the result could be “spontaneous energetic disassembly” of the reactor. When a reporter asked him to explain the difference between “spontaneous energetic disassembly” and an explosion, he angrily refused to answer further questions.

Alarmed by the utility company’s refusal or inability to explain what was happening inside the plant, Pennsylvania Governor Richard Thornburgh suggested that pregnant women and children leave an area within a five-mile radius of the plant. Panic followed. Forty-nine percent of the population living within fifteen miles of the plant—144,000 people—packed up and fled. “The photographs in the press were appalling,” Dilenschneider recalled. “They resembled refugee lines in World War II. People were living off bottled water and canned food.

There was an exodus. They packed their cars and their campers with everything they could, and jammed the highways: babies bundled in blankets, kids with scarves wrapped across their faces to limit their exposure to the ‘radiation,’ and pregnant women in sheer panic about the future they might be facing.”

During the crisis at Three Mile Island, a reporter asked company vice-president Jack Herbein to explain the difference between “spontaneous energetic disassembly” and an explosion.

Following the accident, opinion polls registered a sharp drop in public support for nuclear power, and the nuclear industry responded with a multi-million-dollar media blitz. Teams of utility executives spread across the country to hold press conferences and appear on TV talk shows. Pro-nuclear advertisements were placed in magazines aimed at women readers. Videotapes of experts discussing technical aspects of nuclear power were distributed free to TV stations, and information packets were sent to the print media. An industry-funded Nuclear Energy Education Day was organized on October 18, 1979, with over 1,000 sponsored events, including a brunch for congressional wives in Washington and a joggers’ mass relay race in California. When Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden went on an anti-nuclear speaking tour, the industry sent out two nuclear engineers as a “truth squad” to follow them and refute their arguments.

In reality, however, the nuclear power industry was in decline even before Three-Mile Island. Between 1970 and 1980, the price for building a new reactor had quintupled. The nuclear industry complained that legal challenges and delays from anti-nuclear citizens were responsible for many of the cost increases. Rising costs led utility companies to cancel their plans to build new reactors. The last order for a nuclear power plant was placed in 1978. In 1984 at least half a dozen nuclear power plants under construction were cancelled as the industry realized that it was cheaper to let them sit unused and incomplete than to try to finish and operate them. The 1985 meltdown of the Russian nuclear plant at Chernobyl, which spewed radioactive contamination over Europe and around the globe, seemed to mark the final nail in the coffin of an already dying technology, born of hype and deception. ■

SHOWDOWN IN GLITTER GULCH: NEVADA BETS AGAINST NUCLEAR WASTE

The radioactive waste from nuclear power plants contains the deadliest substances known. It consists mostly of spent fuel which, although it is no longer suitable for generating power, will remain radioactive and lethal for over 100,000 years. At the government's Hanford, Washington, test reactor in the late 1940s, engineers used remote-controlled machinery to remove radioactive waste, put it into heavy containers, and bury it in the ground near Hanford. This crude method has remained the basic model for disposal ever since, despite promises by experts that "science will find a way" to dispose of it safely.

Since the late 1950s, deep underground geologic disposal has been proposed as a means to isolate the used highly radioactive fuel for the thousands of years necessary. Several exploratory efforts to locate repository sites in salt beds buried deep beneath Ohio, Michigan and New York were halted when state and local officials discovered the work being done by the Atomic Energy Commission and objected. By the 1980s, growing quantities of nuclear waste had become the ultimate hot potato. Everyone, including critics of the industry, agreed that the stuff needed to be stored *somewhere*, but nobody wanted it anywhere near where *they* lived.

In 1986, the Department of Energy announced that it had narrowed the locations under consideration to three sites in Nevada, Texas and Washington state. The governors of all three states responded immediately with lawsuits challenging the decision. In 1987, Texas and Washington were eliminated from consideration, leaving Yucca Mountain, Nevada, as the only remaining candidate. Located about 100 miles north of Las Vegas, Yucca Mountain is a barren ridge of compressed volcanic ash. Government scientists stated that nuclear waste could be buried there in underground tunnels with minimal risks to public health or the environment, but Nevada residents remained unconvinced. Surveys showed that Nevadans opposed the Yucca Mountain repository by a 4-to-1 margin.

THE "NEVADA INITIATIVE"

In January 1991, the American Nuclear Energy Council (ANEC) began funding the "Nevada Initiative" in an effort to change public opinion. Designers of the Nevada Initiative included Kent Oram, a key advisor to Nevada Governor Bob Miller; Ed Allison, a longtime Nevada Republican political operative; and Don Williams, a political campaign consultant and lobbyist who had worked for numerous state politicians from both parties. Using military jargon, the plan proposed a series of TV ads to provide "air cover" for the repository plan. Local reporters were to be hired to present the "indus-

try's side of the story" to their peers. Kent Oram trained scientists from the Department of Energy to act as a "scientific truth response team" to reply to critics of the repository. The goal of the campaign, according to the plan, was to "reduce the public's concerns over safety. Once public sentiment swings, the next phase of the campaign will focus on the merits of nuclear energy. . . . With our 'campaign committee' of Nevada political insiders, our strategic response teams, the advertising program and the polls that will provide us a road map along the way, we believe that as each move is made, one or more of the targeted adversaries will begin to surface, move our way, fight us and then, eventually dialogue with the industry. It is through this strategic game of chess that the campaign will ultimately prevail and move to checkmate anti-nuclear forces in Nevada."

The goal was to "reduce the public's concerns over safety" using "our 'campaign committee' of Nevada political insiders, our strategic response teams, the advertising program and the polls that will provide us a road map along the way."

The planners warned, however, that the campaign "has a formidable goal. It took Nevadans a lifetime to build up fears and resentments regarding nuclear energy. Countering the amount of free press against nuclear, such as accidents at Three-Mile Island and Chernobyl, hazardous leaks and various other plant problems, along with science fiction movies, would literally cost tens of millions of dollars in terms of column inches and air time in Nevada alone. Across the country, the cost would run into the billions."

In October 1991, the Nevada Initiative began its first massive barrage of "air cover" ads. Narrated by Ron Vitto, a popular former sportscaster, the ads attempted to demonstrate the safety of transporting high level nuclear waste. One advertisement showed a truck and trailer bearing a cask of nuclear waste being rammed at high speed by a train to show that nuclear waste casks could safely survive such a collision. Other ads featured DOE scientists explaining that nuclear waste would not explode, or claiming that living near a nuclear power plant would not cause cancer.

"Nevada political officials at all levels have been extremely aggressive in opposition to the project," explained a letter dated October 25, 1991, from Florida Power President Allen J. Keesler to other members of the

Edison Electric Institute, a US association of electrical utility companies. "They have effectively frustrated DOE's efforts to move forward. . . . Sustained progress on the Yucca Mountain program can only be achieved by developing a cooperative environment in Nevada." To fund the PR campaign, Keesler asked each utility engaged in nuclear energy production to pay a "special assessment . . . collected through a special billing included with EEI's dues." Keesler's letter closed by reminding recipients that "this document is *Confidential*. You can understand the sensitivity associated with it becoming public."

In November, three weeks into the advertising campaign, industry-funded pollsters conducted a survey and reported that although 72.4% of Nevada residents had seen the ads, the results were "not encouraging":

Fewer than 15 percent of the respondents who had seen the ads said the ads made them more supportive of the repository, while 32 percent said the messages made them less supportive. Despite the barrage of pro-repository messages, almost three-quarters of the respondents (73.8%) said they would oppose the repository if they were to vote on whether it should be built—almost exactly the same proportion as before the ad campaign. . . . Almost half (48.5%) of the respondents who had seen the advertisements said they did not believe the ads, . . . while 3.3 percent felt insulted . . . and 11.8 percent disagreed with the ads for a variety of reasons. . . . These three categories of negative comments make up 63.6 percent of the recorded responses.

A few weeks later, the campaign hit another, even worse snag. One of the nuclear utility executives who had received Allen Keesler's "confidential" letter decided to leak it to anti-nuclear forces, along with other key documents detailing the industry's PR strategy. The documents proved highly embarrassing. In televised testimony before the Nevada Commission on Nuclear Projects, ANEC vice-president Ed Davis had claimed that the purpose of the advertising campaign was strictly "to inform and educate the public." Newspapers and television coverage contrasted his statement with the campaign's internal documents, which talked of bringing pressure on the state of Nevada to cooperate with the program, and hiring local reporters to present the "industry's side of the stories" and "convince the public that nuclear energy is safe."

Nevadans reacted with outrage. Newspapers and television coverage featured scathing attacks by state officials that continued for weeks. Nevada Senator Richard Bryan demanded an explanation from Energy Secretary James Watkins regarding the role of his department in the PR campaign. Governor Bob Miller wrote the governors of other states with nuclear power plants, challenging the propriety of using utility ratepayer funds to

persuade Nevadans that they ought to accept nuclear wastes that no other state wanted.

The PR campaign's death throes are captured in a report titled "The Nevada Initiative: A Risk Communication Fiasco" by James Flynn, Paul Slovic and C.K. Mertz, employees of an opinion polling firm named Decision Research:

Perhaps the most devastating rejoinders to the ANEC campaign came from a pair of Las Vegas disk jockeys who began to parody each of the new TV ads. The main character in their satiric skits bore the mock name "Ron Ditto," whose simple-minded pronouncements were heaped with ridicule: "Hi! This is Ron Ditto, your formerly respected sportscaster, trading in your respect for much-needed dollars."

Local businesses joined in. A TV advertisement showed the disk jockeys in a huge pair of overalls as a two-headed mutant, "Yucca Mountain Man," in a commercial for a Las Vegas auto dealership. A restaurant extolled the quality of the tomatoes in its salad bar by putting one through the same tests that nuclear waste casks were subjected to in the ANEC ads: After the tomato survives being run into a cement wall, hit by a speeding train and dropped from a high tower, "You can be sure that it's one high-quality tomato."

The ANEC campaign, faced with disbelief, ridicule, and little measurable influence on public opinion, was discontinued. . . . By that time, the campaign's credibility had been damaged considerably. A survey conducted in June 1992 by researchers from Arizona State University and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas showed that after seeing the ads only 3.3 percent of respondents reported an increased level of trust in the repository program while almost 41 percent were *less* trusting and the remainder were unchanged.

In April 1991 former Secretary of Energy James Watkins created a task force to "analyze the critical institutional question of how the Department of Energy (DOE) might strengthen public trust and confidence in the civilian radioactive waste management program." After two years of public meetings and hearing formal presentations from more than 100 organization representatives, the task force concluded that "distrust [in DOE's activities] is not irrational." Moreover, "this distrust will continue for a long time, will require sustained commitments from successive Secretaries of Energy to overcome, and will demand that DOE act in ways that are unnecessary for organizations that have sustained trust and confidence."

During the task force hearings, participants made repeated references to the public relations tactics of the nuclear industry. DOE found itself in the unfortunate position of being blamed for these activities as well as their own. The huge sums of money paid to PR operatives of the nuclear industry had left a legacy that was not only unsuccessful in molding public opinion, but permanently harmful to the industry's image. ■

TEMPORARY STORAGE OF PERMANENT WASTE: THE NUKEM STRATEGY

The government's inability to develop a permanent storage site for nuclear waste has forced utility companies to fall back on a "temporary" plan—storing spent fuel locally in the yards of power plants across the country. A strategy for dealing with this latest embarrassment is outlined in an industry-published article titled, "The Public Relations Behind Nuclear Waste." It begins: "So . . . the necessity of keeping spent fuel in dry casks and in the yards of power plants is adding yet one more blemish on the face of the nuclear industry, *is it?* Not when good PR is used. Many utilities across the United States are finding that public relations campaigns, when launched well in advance of dry cask installation, are turning potentially negative situations into positive ones. . . . Make no mistake about it. All the public relations in the world will never cause the public to greet radioactive waste with open arms. But for those utilities running out of pool space, a smart PR program will make them better equipped to temper the tempest and to get the public thinking about waste in a more scientific way."

The article appeared in the March 1995 issue of the *Nukem Market Report*, published by Nukem, Inc., of Stamford, Connecticut. Described by the *New York Times* as "unfortunately named," Nukem, Inc., is a subsidiary of the German corporation, Nukem GmbH. Apparently in German, the name doesn't carry quite the same negative connotations as it does in English. Evidently aware that its name is a bit of a PR problem, the American subsidiary has tried various typographical strategies to encourage people to place the emphasis on the second syllable when pronouncing Nukem—sometimes spelling it, for example, with the "k" or the last three letters capitalized, i.e., "NuKem" or "NuKEM."

Nukem GmbH designs and operates waste treatment systems for the chemical and nuclear power industries. In December 1987, the company's nuclear shipping unit temporarily lost its license after it was disclosed that some 2,000 barrels of nuclear waste had been illegally shipped into West Germany from Belgium and stored without proper identification. The company was investigated following charges by German politician Volker Hauff that Nukem had sold fissionable materials to Libya and Pakistan in violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. The charges were never proven, but the scandal led to the suspension of top Nukem executives Karl-Gerhard Hackstein and Peter Jelinek-Fink.

According to the *Nukem Market Report*, "honesty, openness and cooperation" are the PR tools with which utility companies can persuade "their next-door neighbors, local government and business leaders, and environmentalists" to tolerate nuclear waste. As an example

of "openness," it advises utility companies to conduct plant tours, meet with local elected officials, and communicate their point of view to plant employees, since "neighbors tend to ask plant workers for the 'inside scoop' on what's really going on."

According to the Nukem Market Report, "honesty, openness and cooperation" are the PR tools with which utility companies can persuade "their next-door neighbors, local government and business leaders, and environmentalists" to tolerate nuclear waste.

The Nukem strategy also attempts to enlist "moderate" anti-nuclear groups in support of selected goals of local power companies. In Michigan, for example, the Consumers Power Company "made a presentation to the moderate group, West Michigan Environmental Action Council" and succeeded in persuading the council to focus "more on getting the material out of the state of Michigan and to Yucca Mountain . . . rather than bemoaning the fact that *'The waste is here.'*"

As an example of "cooperation," Nukem praises the Baltimore Gas & Electric Company for paying its employees to "donate" one hour each week of public service activities in their community. "As a result, BG&E employees serve in senior positions in local volunteer fire companies and have 'adopted' a total of three elementary schools for mentoring and tutoring programs. Over 100 employees are coordinating about 50 charities, including the United Way, Multiple Sclerosis, Muscular Dystrophy, and March of Dimes fundraising drives."

By cultivating a caring, community-minded image, BG&E has been able to limit opposition to its dry cask proposal. The key, says BG&E Public Information Officer Karl Neddenien, is to build this image early: "As long as ten years before a utility even *thinks* about a dry storage facility, it had better have developed a good community image."

These innocuous-sounding activities are state-of-the-art PR, reflecting the industry's sophisticated understanding of the techniques necessary to sway public opinion in today's cynical world. During the 50 years since the detonation of the first atom bomb, public opinion has steadily become more suspicious of nuclear power, despite the work of the powerful, well-funded nuclear lobby. ■

NOW IN BOOKSTORES!

Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: LIES, DAMN LIES AND THE PUBLIC RELATIONS INDUSTRY

by *John C. Stauber and Sheldon Rampton*

"Important . . . unmasks how corporations manipulate our democracy."

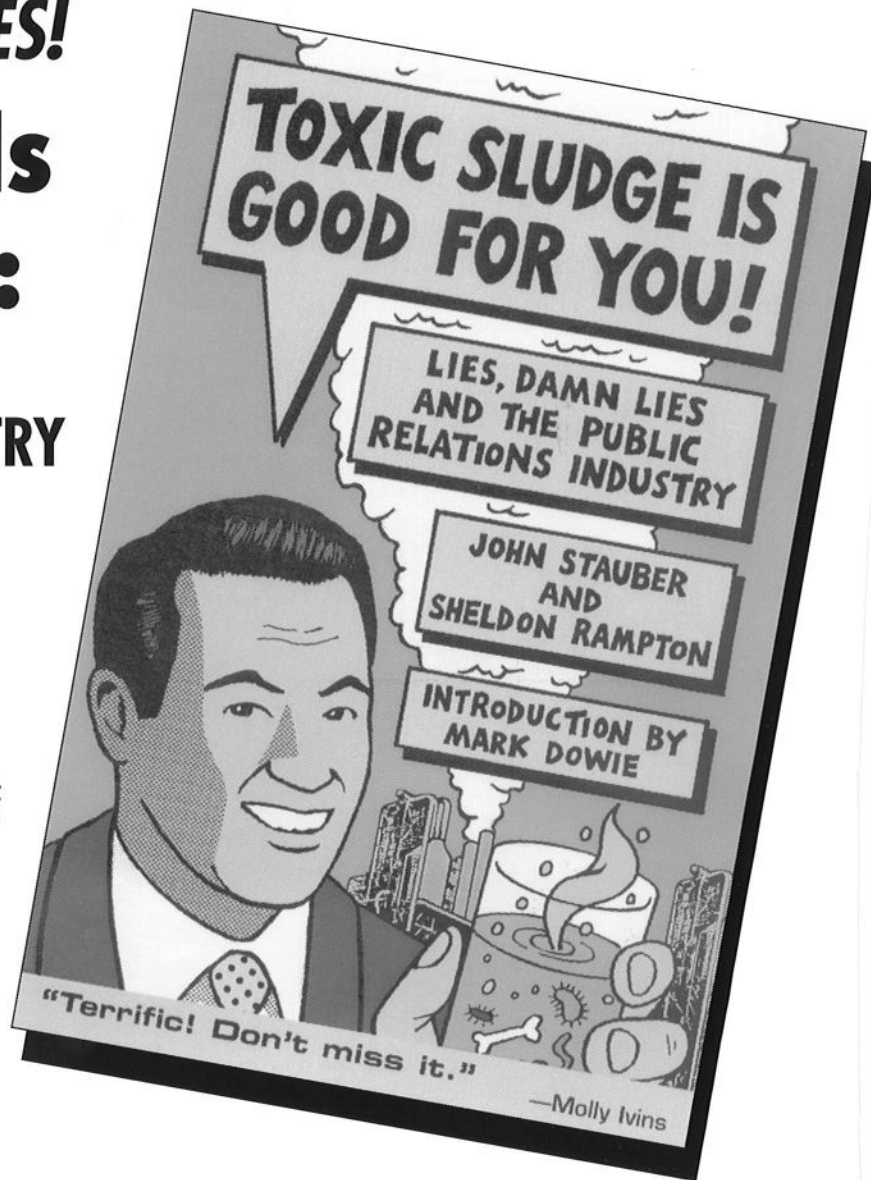
—**William Greider**, author,
Who Will Tell the People

"Exposes how far we've tumbled down the dark hole of 'Newspeak' that Orwell warned about. . . . It could be the flashlight to find our way out."

—**Jim Hightower**, author, talk show host

"A well-written, enlightening look at a war of the powerful against society."

—**Edward Herman**,
co-author, *Manufacturing Consent*



Toxic Sludge blows the lid off today's multi-billion-dollar propaganda-for-hire industry. The book names names and reveals how public relations wizards concoct and spin the news, organize phony "grassroots" front groups, spy on citizens, and conspire with lobbyists and politicians to thwart democracy.

This exposé documents the activities of secretive, little-known mega-firms such as Hill & Knowlton, Burson-Marsteller and Ketchum PR—the "invisible men" who control our political debates and public opinion, twisting reality and protecting the powerful from scrutiny.

Publisher: Common Courage Press, Monroe, Maine
Bookstore price: \$16.95 • Ask for it in your local bookstore or order it directly.

By phone: 1-800-497-3207

By mail: Send \$20/book (includes postage and handling) to:
Center for Media & Democracy, 3318 Gregory Street, Madison, WI 53711.