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“Obama's Nuclear Policy Takes One Step Forward & Two Steps Back”

By [John Horgan](#)



In 1983, a Columbia University undergraduate named Barack Obama wrote an article, “[Breaking the War Mentality](#),” for the school publication *Sundial*. Obama expressed the hope that someday humanity would abolish nuclear weapons and create a “nuclear free world.” Obama never abandoned that dream. The Nobel Foundation awarded him its Peace Prize last December in large part because of his “vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons.”

Obama has recently taken one step toward a nuclear free world, and two steps away from it.

First, the forward step. Last week, Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev agreed to slash their strategic nuclear arsenals from 2,200 warheads each to 1,500. The U.S. and Russia will still have almost 20,000 warheads between them, but this step still deserves a big yay.

In February, however, Obama took another step that will make it harder to rid the world of nuclear threats once and for all. He announced that the Department of Energy would provide \$8 billion in loan guarantees to help a utility build two new reactors in Georgia. Hoping to prod Wall Street into funding a renewal of nuclear power, Obama has proposed additional guarantees of more than \$40 billion for other reactors. This means that if a utility abandons construction of a new plant because of cost overruns and political opposition--as General Electric did with its \$6 billion plant in Shoreham, N.Y., in 1989--taxpayers get stuck with another bailout.

Obama has been pro-nuclear-energy since his days as an Illinois state senator and U.S. senator, when [he accepted donations](#) from the giant Illinois-based nuclear utility Exelon. Obama says we need more nukes to help us counteract global warming, a position with which many prominent greenies--notably, **Whole Earth Catalogue founder Stewart Brand and Patrick Moore, a founder of Greenpeace—agree. I disagree. More nukes may make the world less warm, but they will also make it less safe. Materials and technologies for nuclear energy can be diverted into making nuclear weapons, either overtly or covertly.**

Moreover, every nuclear site represents a potential dirty nuclear bomb. My perspective on this issue stems in part from the fact that my family lives in Garrison, N.Y., a hamlet on the Hudson River. About five miles south of us the twin domes of the Indian Point nuclear-power plant squat on the Hudson’s east bank. On September 11, 2001, American Airlines Flight 11 skimmed just a few hundred feet above Garrison and Indian Point before plowing into the World Trade Center.

As “60 Minutes” pointed out a month after 9/11, the Boeing 767 jumbo jet could have caused much more death and destruction if it had smashed into Indian Point and spewed radioactive debris into the atmosphere. In 2004 the 9/11 Commission reported that Mohamed Atta, one of the pilots who flew into the Twin Towers, considered attacking a nuclear facility in the New York region, almost certainly Indian Point.

Then there is the waste problem, which brings me to Obama’s other backward step. For decades, the Department of Energy planned to bury the literally hot waste generated by reactors inside Yucca Mountain in the Nevada Test Site, which is already contaminated from decades of nuclear-bomb tests. But the Yucca Mountain project, which has cost more than \$9 billion, bogged down in technical and political obstacles, notably adamant opposition from Nevada Senator Harry Reid. Last year Obama pulled the plug on the Nevada repository, perhaps as a political favor to Reid, the powerful Senate majority leader.

For the foreseeable future—and conceivably forever—waste will keep accumulating at 104 nuclear plants around the U.S. Each of these waste-storage sites represents another potential target for terrorists, in addition to active reactors.

We’re stuck with the existing reactors and storage sites. But given the volatility of world affairs, creating still more potential targets for nuclear terrorism would be irresponsible. And if the U.S. starts building more nukes and even selling them to other countries, it is in no position, for example, to tell Russia that [marketing modified reactors from nuclear submarines](#) as commercial devices may be a bad idea.

To my mind, these security issues trump economic and even environmental considerations. If Obama really wants to take us toward a nuclear-free world, he should reconsider nuclear energy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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