

VOX POPULI: Government sugarcoats dangerous reality of nuclear power plants

Vox Populi, Vox Dei is a daily column that runs on Page 1 of the vernacular Asahi Shimbun.

The year 1986 was a veritable annus horribilis for science and technology. The U.S. Space Shuttle Challenger exploded shortly after liftoff in January. Then came the Chernobyl meltdown in April.

Back then, the probability of a Space Shuttle failure was believed to be 1-in-100,000. That meant just one failure in 300 years of daily launches.

This "safety myth" was debunked by the Rogers Commission, a presidential commission tasked with investigating the Challenger disaster. Richard Feynman (1918-1988), a Nobel laureate physicist and one of the best-known members of the commission, likened the risk inherent in shuttle launches to Russian roulette--a dangerous gamble in which the player closes his eyes to "inconvenient truth."

In Japan, the probability of a nuclear accident was said to be "1-in-5 billion, comparable to being hit by a meteor." I'd say this was more lie than myth.

An accident did occur at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant. But even though the situation has yet to be brought under control, economy minister Banri Kaieda has declared other plants safe and called for them to resume operations.

Does anyone really believe him?

The economy ministry is a party involved in the accident. Kaieda may be likened to a bankrupt person offering security for someone taking out a loan.

Now that conventional safety measures have proved useless, how could anyone talk so casually about safety?

In Saga Prefecture, a meeting was slated for June 25 to explain to citizens about the resumption of operations at the Genkai nuclear power plant. But as I understand it, only a few citizens, selected by the central government, were allowed to attend. This format tells us a lot about how the government goes about its business. It certainly doesn't get my vote.

Feynman battled cancer while he investigated the Challenger disaster. In his report, titled "Personal Observations on the Reliability of the Shuttle," he concluded, "For successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for nature cannot be fooled."

He was a scientist with conscience, and I will always remember his words.

--The Asahi Shimbun, June 25

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