



Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on October 21, 2019

Published in the October 21, 2019 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 35, No. 20

Correction, Please!

Climate-obsessed Greenies Fear Emissions, but Reject Carbon-free Nuclear Power

Item: Time, dated September 23, 2019, filled a double-sized magazine of 112 pages (in the print version) with a “Special Climate Issue.” The issue leads with a piece with this premise: It is the year 2050 and this is “How We Survived Climate Change,” written by environmental activist Bill McKibben. In this imaginary future, “the climate fight remains the consuming battle of our age, but its most intense phase may be in our rearview mirror.”



In the entire issue there is but one small section (two paragraphs in the digital version) devoted to it. There, contributor Andrew Blum does acknowledge (on page 107): “Nuclear reactors have been providing zero-carbon power since the 1950s, and today supply 20% of the U.S.’s electricity and 11% of the globe’s. But safety and environmental concerns have increased the cost and complexity of nuclear power plants, and their construction has all but stopped in the U.S.”

Item: Greenpeace is an environmental organization; it declares on its website: “Nuclear energy has no place in a safe, clean, sustainable future. Nuclear energy is both expensive and dangerous, and just because nuclear pollution is invisible doesn’t mean it’s clean. Renewable energy is better for the environment, the economy, and doesn’t come with the risk of a nuclear meltdown.” Greenpeace’s message also asserts: “High profile disasters in Chernobyl, Ukraine in 1986 and Fukushima, Japan in 2011 have raised public awareness of the dangers of nuclear power.”

Item: CNN for September 4 summarized the stances of Democratic presidential candidates following that news network’s “climate crisis town hall.” (We concentrate herein on those leading the polls.) For instance: “Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren are both opposed — in different ways — to nuclear power,” essentially differing at the rates in which the candidates would get rid of nuclear power.

Item: The position of former Vice President Joe Biden was noted by the Verge in a September 5 piece entitled “Democrats Are Divided on Using Nuclear Energy to Stop Climate Change.” The media site said Biden “is curious enough to throw an undisclosed amount of money into nuclear R&D.” That “curiosity” doesn’t seem particularly fervent. As the Verge said, according to the Biden climate plan, the candidate wants “to look at issues, ranging from cost to safety to waste disposal systems, that remains [sic] an ongoing challenge with nuclear power today.”

Correction: The globe, some 25,000 miles around with a mass of 6.6 sextillion tons, will keep rotating despite human activities. It will spin even if Democrats in the United States gain power while



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repudiating nuclear, a source of energy that is safe, comparatively cheap, reliable, generates no greenhouse gases, and (unlike solar and wind) doesn't require huge amounts of land. Nonetheless, there are significant decisions pending that will affect the environment and economy.

Meanwhile, many (but not all) veteran left-wing political gurus spurn nuclear energy, even as *a few* of the nascent zealots of the Green New Deal seem to be begrudgingly okay with it (depending on the day and the direction of the political winds).

American statists typically parrot the revealed wisdom of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Yet, as one *Forbes* writer has reminded us, reports from the IPCC, the International Energy Agency, the UN Sustainable Solutions Network, and the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate have "argued for a tripling of nuclear energy, requiring over a thousand new reactors to stabilize carbon emissions." Even the left-leaning Union of Concerned Scientists maintains that nuclear energy is necessary to address climate change. So much for listening to experts.

Let's stipulate that nuclear energy isn't perfect. As with other sources of energy, there are trade-offs to consider. For example, fossil fuels are generally cheaper of late than nuclear. Nuclear energy is the third largest electricity source in the United States, behind natural gas and coal. It is dependable and available when the sun does not shine and the wind does not blow. Nuclear power operates around-the-clock at more than 92-percent average capacity factor. That is more than twice the capacity factor of any other "clean" energy source (including solar and wind, which collectively account for around eight percent of the U.S. power supply).

By comparison, wind is online and generating power only about 37 percent of the time, with solar clocking in at 26 percent. They require (expensive) battery storage. And as noted by physicist Mark Mills, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, "Batteries are a lousy way to store energy." The ingredients of battery packs are not "green." As summarized by Mills, "You have to consume 100 barrels of oil in China to make that battery pack. Dig up 1,000 pounds of stuff to process it. Digging is done with oil, by big machines, so we're consuming energy to 'save' energy."

Leading politicians seemingly live in another world. Candidate Joe Biden, during a debate this summer, answered "no" when he was asked if there would be "any place for fossil fuels, including coal and fracking" in his administration. That is not exactly what his own plan says, but perhaps he didn't know that. What is in his plan is bad enough.

Keep in mind that he is the supposed moderate among leading Dems. Here's how the *Wall Street Journal* summarized Biden's plan: He would "regulate gasoline cars out of existence, forge a new transcontinental railroad, retrofit half of U.S. buildings within 15 years, and restrict development on nearly a third of the country's land and water." Biden does appear willing to spend some tax money on research for nuclear power; Warren and Sanders wouldn't. The senators from Massachusetts and Vermont have both promised to dismantle existing nuclear power plants.

Keep in mind that climate change is said to be among the most important issues for Democrats, with many pointing their collective finger at man-made carbon emissions as the prime villain. Yet as a spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute has noted, the projected renewable timelines for most political candidates in the United States cannot be reached unless the mix of energy sources includes nuclear. As noted by Neal Cohen of the institute, nuclear power "represents close to 55 percent of the carbon-free energy in this country. If you are going to reduce emissions you are going to need to



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maintain that level and add more carbon-free resources, whether that be wind, solar, carbon capture [or] other additional nuclear energy.”

A study group, led by MIT researchers in collaboration with colleagues from the Idaho National Laboratory and University of Madison-Wisconsin, not long ago released the finding of its analysis. It found that unless nuclear energy is meaningfully incorporated into the global mix of low-carbon energy technologies, “the challenge of climate change will be much more difficult and costly to solve.”

Indeed, Professor Jacopo Buongiorno, head of the MIT’s Center for Advanced Nuclear Energy Systems, says that in a world where the climate is changing, we can’t afford not to build new nuclear power plants. Their analysis, as the professor told WBUR (a public radio station in Boston), “shows that the most effective and frankly least-cost path toward decarbonizing our economy includes nuclear energy.”

Nuclear energy is truly impressive. As described by the Nuclear Energy Institute:

One uranium fuel pellet — about the size of a gummy bear — creates as much energy as one ton of coal, 149 gallons of oil or 17,000 cubic feet of natural gas. A single nuclear power reactor generates enough electricity on average to power 755,000 homes without emitting any greenhouse gases. That’s more than enough to power a city the size of Philadelphia.

Still, recognizing its drawbacks, the industry has plans to develop a new generation of small modular and advanced reactors. Using thorium as an alternative to uranium ore for producing nuclear fuel does have some advantages, as has been pointed out by (among others) Rob Jackson, chairman of the Earth System Science Department at Stanford.

However, obsessed fear-mongers — Greenpeace is but one example — contend that nuclear power is a potential disaster. But getting out of bed can be dangerous. Dams can break, killing thousands. Producing and using coal certainly affect the environment, as do petroleum products, though technology has reduced their negative effects. Oxford researcher Hannah Ritchie has calculated that (per unit of electricity generated) oil is 263 times more deadly than nuclear power, while ordinary coal is 352 times deadlier, and lignite coal even more deadly than that.

Here’s another related factoid, by James Meigs, former editor of *Popular Mechanics*: “More people have fallen off of roofs installing solar panels than have been killed in the entire history of nuclear power in the U.S.”

Should we outlaw all those sources of deadly energy?

Of course, nuclear opponents always bring up the accidents at Chernobyl (in the former Soviet Union), Three Mile Island (in Pennsylvania), and Fukushima (in Japan). But as usual, what a lot of people know (or think they know) just ain’t so. Katie Tubb, a senior policy analyst for energy and environmental issues at the Heritage Foundation, is succinct:

It may be hard to believe, but no one has died from radiation exposure from the latter two. In the case of America’s worst nuclear accident at Three Mile Island in 1979, actual radiation exposure for the 2 million people living closest to the reactor amounted to less than a dental x-ray. For decades, state and federal agencies and private companies tested agricultural, health and environmental factors, finding nothing of concern.

As far as the Chernobyl incident, as numerous experts have mentioned, it was the result of Soviet designs and bungling as well as human negligence. Its meltdown, as recounted by William Shughart,



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“culminated in the immediate deaths of 30 people, two of whom died during the meltdown itself and another 28 dying shortly afterward from radiation exposure.”

Other than the Chernobyl disaster, as has been written by Shughart (a senior fellow at the Independent Institute and a professor at Utah State University),

no instances of death related to radiation exposure from nuclear power plants have been recorded, even though more than 600 nuclear reactors have been built around the world since 1954. Remarkably, deaths associated with wind turbines over the past decade are three times as high as deaths from Chernobyl, although this statistic gets little if any media coverage.

(There have been a number of studies about Chernobyl over the years, with differing numbers about casualties. The UN, for instance, has confirmed 43 deaths said to be the result of radiation.)

Nuclear waste remains an issue, but only because misinformed people want it out of their vicinities. *How* to store the waste is less a concern than *where* to do so.

Michael Shellenberger (president of Environmental Progress and a convert to nuclear) noted that when it comes to electricity production, nuclear waste is the only type that is safely contained. “All other waste for electricity goes into the environment including from coal, natural gas and — here’s another uncomfortable conclusion — solar panels.”

Here’s a bit more about the extent of solar “waste” as compared to nuclear. There are, recounts Heritage’s Tubb,

81,500 tons of nuclear waste from commercial power reactors in the United States. That represents all the nuclear waste from every commercial reactor in the United States since 1957 — no more than a football field 10 yards deep. For reference, the International Renewable Energy Agency estimates the United States will have 170,000 to one million tons of waste from solar panels by 2030.

Others have noted that the total of nuclear waste in the United States over six decades could be fitted into the size of a Walmart store.

Finland has shown how this matter can be handled. The Finns are constructing a permanent underground depository. “The project has been supported by the government and, most importantly, by the local community,” says Jonathan Lesser, an adjunct fellow at the Manhattan Institute and author of the report “Is There a Future for Nuclear Power in the United States?”

Here, the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP), according to Lesser, “stores mid-level nuclear waste and is located just south of Carlsbad, N.M.” It is, he notes, “strongly supported by the local community because of its economic benefits.”

Yet the loudest anti-carbon, climate-change voices continue to shriek that our situation is urgent — even as they disdain our best source of carbon-free power. It makes you wonder if the people who act foolish really aren’t acting.

— William P. Hoar

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