

By [Joshua Holland](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [May 2, 2006](#).

If George Bush gets his way, the USA is going nuclear -- and he won't let a little thing like radioactive waste stand in his way.

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George W. Bush has a vision for a strong, independent nuclear America. He wants nuclear weapons for everyday use -- deterrence is for Democrats -- and he wants to build

dozens of new nuclear energy plants across the United States.

He'll also ship thousands of tons of nuclear waste across the country, first to a huge storage facility in Yucca Mountain, Nev. But that will only contain a little more than what we already have sitting around. We'll need nine more Yuccas by the end of the century if Bush's plans go through.

Filling the one we already have means shipping highly radioactive waste through 44 states -- [coming within a half mile of 50 million Americans](#). The most toxic, deadly substances known to humanity would pass through Boston, Baltimore, Newark and Miami.

A 1982 [study](#) by Sandia Labs -- the country's premiere nuclear research facility -- found that a containment breach in one plant in Pennsylvania would kill 74,000 people within a year and another 34,000 later from cancer. The 1986 [Chernobyl disaster](#) spewed more radiation across Europe than was released in Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined, took out 486 villages in Belarus and left a region that had been inhabited by 100,000 people a glow-in-the-dark no-man's land.

But don't worry. According to the administration and the deep-pocketed nuclear lobby, it's all perfectly safe. Sure, there's no human invention that's foolproof and, yes, we're talking about making dozens of

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ripe new targets for terrorists to attack, but hasn't the administration and its corporate partners earned our trust?

Nuclear Renaissance

According to Bush administration spin, the mighty atom is a 21st century panacea for the United States' -- and the world's -- most intractable problems. Nuclear energy will free us from our dependence on those "tyrannical regimes" that sponsor global terror, bail out the planet from global warming and avert a new superpower struggle by giving fast-industrializing behemoths like China and India an endless supply of "renewable" energy. Nuclear [weapons that we can deploy freely](#) in small conflicts will lock in our global dominance for the rest of the century. And, of course, all this will create lots and lots of high-paying jobs.

It sounds great on paper. But if you look behind the dramatic shifts in U.S. nuclear policy over the course of Bush's presidency, you find an intense lobbying and public relations campaign by a handful of firms that stand to rake in billions from the construction of new civilian reactors, and by a generation of Cold Warriors that lusts after new, more "usable" nukes for their toy chest.

The administration has offered up a series of initiatives that will reshape decades of nuclear policy, both civilian and military. Bush scrapped the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and [undermined the Test Ban Treaty](#). And it's not just plans for new bombs and new reactors; he's shifted U.S. policy towards countries like India and Pakistan that developed nukes outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

And Bush plans to use Yucca Mountain in Nevada as a repository for the world's nuclear waste, not just our own. It's the linchpin of what the administration hopes will become a new economic order -- superseding OPEC with a nuclear cartel that reads "Made in the USA."

At the heart of Bush's atomic dreams is the [Global Nuclear Energy Partnership](#) (GNEP) announced in February. Under the plan, we'll dramatically expand nuclear energy production at home, encourage new nuclear generation abroad and import other countries' spent fuel for reprocessing in the United States.

The idea is to limit the two most sensitive parts of the nuclear cycle -- enrichment and disposal -- to a handful of sites in the United States, Russia and perhaps France and Japan. In January Vladimir Putin announced that one piece of the puzzle -- a joint waste initiative between the United States and Russia -- was a done deal.

The GNEP constitutes a [sharp break with decades of American nuclear policy](#), dating back to Jimmy Carter. He banned nuclear fuel reprocessing in 1977, concluding -- along with the American public -- that the costs were too high and the hazards too great.

According to the administration, GNEP will incorporate "new proliferation-resistant technologies to recover more energy and reduce waste" from spent fuel -- there are an estimated 55,000 *tons* of the stuff sitting around -- which will "reduce the risk of nuclear proliferation worldwide." But while the first moves have begun -- in addition to the deal with Russia, Bush signed [a major, possibly illegal, nuclear agreement with India](#) just last month -- those "proliferation-resistant technologies" are still on the drawing board. As Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, [told the *Christian Science Monitor*](#): "What seems rather fanciful about this project is that the fuel-supply aspect appears contingent on proving some highly advanced technology."

It's a different kind of faith-based initiative; Bush is barreling full-speed ahead with his programs and *assuming* that we'll invent the technology we need to do it all as we go along.

It may be Bush's boldest vision yet, but it's nothing new; like so much we've seen from this administration, Nixon's presidency is the source of inspiration, and his old staff are the agents. In his 1974 State of the Union Address, during the height of the great oil shock, Nixon touted his proposed "Operation Independence," declaring that "1974 must be the year in which we organize a full-scale effort to provide for our energy needs." The plan would have increased the United States' use of nuclear energy in order to break the back of OPEC.

But Nixon's vision of "independence" suffered a meltdown of public opinion and political opposition after the near disaster at Three Mile Island in 1979 -- the most serious accident in the history of American nuclear energy. Since then, the domestic nuclear agenda has been in deep freeze, and the 1986 Chernobyl disaster only strengthened public resolve against restarting it.

On the military side, Bush wants to shrug off decades of constraints and develop a new generation of nukes. Fred Kaplan, writing in [Slate](#), noted some of the overlooked provisions in Bush's 2004 defense budget, including the repeal of a 1992 ban on the research and development of "low-yield" nuclear weapons. Our cash outlay for new nukes, given the United States' military supremacy, is [stunning](#):

[T]he Department of Energy is spending an astonishing \$6.5 billion on nuclear weapons and President Bush is requesting \$6.8 billion more for next year and a total of \$30 billion over the following four years. ... Measured in "real dollars" (that is, adjusting for inflation), this year's spending on nuclear activities exceeds by over 50 percent the average annual sum (\$4.2 billion) that the United States spent -- again, in real dollars -- throughout the four and a half decades of the Cold War.

The military energy complex

While the administration's civilian initiatives have been launched with great fanfare, Bush's revolutionary nuclear weapons policies have been low-key -- no grand pronouncements, no media rollouts. But the line between military nukes and civilian energy is not a clean one. A network of

advocacy groups, lobbyists and corporations link the nuclear community together. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) -- known to be firmly in the pocket of the industry -- is charged with overseeing both sides of the atom.

The military and civilian programs are joined by companies like General Electric, a major defense contractor that builds and services civilian reactors (GE stopped manufacturing nuclear weapons in 1992) and Bechtel, which [despite an atrocious safety and environmental record](#), has a \$6 billion contract to develop Yucca Mountain, services two-thirds of the civilian plants in the United States (and more overseas), and is part of a consortium that manages the military's Nevada Test Site, where advanced nuclear weapons tests are conducted. Another key player is defense giant Lockheed-Martin -- also part of the Nevada Test Site Team -- which runs Sandia National Labs, where both civilian and military research is conducted. Westinghouse, the world's leading manufacturer of civilian reactors, was the government's third-largest nuclear weapons contractor as recently as 1995. The United States' last full-scale nuclear weapons plant in Oak Ridge Tennessee is managed by a consortium including Bechtel. It took over the contract from Lockheed-Martin in 2000. Bechtel and Westinghouse are both making a fortune cleaning up nuclear facilities across America, both civilian and military.

The nuclear power industry is snuggled up tight with government -- even more cozily than most. The NRC -- supposedly the public's watchdog -- is financed not with tax dollars but by rate payers, meaning through the companies themselves. All the while, a revolving door between business and government spins like a top. According to the [National Catholic Reporter](#), the NRC has seen its "senior staff regularly moving into the nuclear industry as employees and consultants." A General Accounting Office survey in 2000 showed that more than a quarter of all NRC staffers "are considering leaving the agency within a year." "Everyone in any NRC position who can goes to private industry," said one whistleblower.

That's pretty much true across all of the sectors of nuclear technology. Only weeks after the passage of last year's energy bill -- which [showered billions on nuclear power operators](#) in direct subsidies and other giveaways-- eyebrows were raised when [NBC reported](#) that a key Senate staffer "who helped steer those billions through" did so "in between stints representing nuclear power companies like Exelon" as a major lobbyist. Former Homeland Security Secretary Tom ridge joined Exelon's board soon after leaving the administration. According to [Open Secrets](#), which tracks campaign contributions, Dick Cheney, who as former defense secretary and CEO of Halliburton is intimately connected with both the military establishment and the energy industry, is "by far, nuclear power's biggest ally." The Cheneys are heavily invested in Lockheed-Martin; Lynn sits on the company's board of directors.

It's just one big, happy nuclear family.

Who's bold vision is it?

Most of the provisions of GNEP started not in the Department of Energy, but in the corporate suite of

the Sandia Corp. Sandia is a wholly owned subsidiary of Lockheed Martin and runs much of the [National Nuclear Security Administration's](#) research infrastructure at two enormous campuses in Albuquerque, N.M., and Livermore, Calif.

According to *Sandia Lab News*, a company newsletter, the GNEP started with a presentation then Vice President (and now Sandia's president) Tom Hunter made to the Department of Energy in 1996:

"Basically, if you run through the chronology, we have been urging some of the things that came out of GNEP (Global Nuclear Energy Partnership) since 1996," he says. "Our concern as a national security lab has always been that you can't influence nuclear safety, security and proliferation risks at the global level if you're not in the nuclear business [We have to] have an American-based nuclear supply industry that is capable of being a leading supplier across the globe."

"Our role has been invisible leadership," Hunter told the newsletter. The company spent a decade "organizing and articulating the arguments for US leadership from the perspective of ... what might happen, domestically and globally, if we don't go forward with nuclear energy." And legislators like Sens. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., Wayne Allard, R-Colo., and Harry Reid, D-Neb., and Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, were more than receptive to the message -- executives like Sandia's Hunter got exactly what they wanted.

The dollars at stake are massive, and energy deregulation -- predating Bush -- provided huge windfalls for the industry. In the 1990s staid, highly regulated utility companies gave way to nuclear wildcatters. Layers and layers of Limited Liability Companies with no liquidity shielded parent corporations from litigation, and they began to use America's aging nuclear infrastructure to shake some silver out of the treasury.

One of the schemes -- or scams -- that resulted from deregulation is known as "gold mining." The gold is in the form of billions of dollars in funds -- paid by utility ratepayers -- that were established to clean up nuclear generator sites at the end of their life spans.

Paul Gunter of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service gave the *National Catholic Reporter* an example of the money to be made in the shakedown: "AmerGen, which bought [GPU Nuclear Corp.'s] Oyster Creek reactor, basically in a garage sale atmosphere, paid \$10 million and intends to inherit over \$400 million in decommissioning trust funds."

The new owners operate the reactors as long as they can, and when the plants are decommissioned, they clean up the sites on the cheap (which means poorly). Unused funds aren't returned to the ratepayers -- the firms pocket them.

Buried in K Street's 2005 Energy Bill, along with a mountain of production tax credits and loan guarantees, is [a rule change](#) that will free up \$1.3 billion in decommissioning funds.

But the most important initiative so far has been the development of Yucca Mountain. Waste disposal is the prerequisite for everything -- for building new plants, for upgrading the nuclear arsenal and for implementing the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership.

Lobbying on the project has been hot and heavy since the site was selected in the late 1980s. The location is problematic. According to Public Citizen ([PDF](#)):

Yucca Mountain has not proven to be a geologically suitable site to store radioactive waste, which remains deadly for thousands of years. The Yucca Mountain Project would entail tens of thousands of shipments over the nation's roads, rails and rivers, posing innumerable questions about transportation safety in towns and neighborhoods nationwide.

Despite the potential hazards -- Yucca Mountain is perched above a freshwater aquifer in an active earthquake zone -- Public Citizen's report finds that the scientific and safety questions about the project have been "smothered under a mountain of lobbyists," and concludes that "the nuclear industry no doubt anticipates that there is no economic problem, no public health threat, no long-term form of irrational energy policy idiocy that can't be overcome by spending 'what it takes' to influence Congress."

Invisible leadership

Nuclear energy's lobbying arm on Capitol Hill is the Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI), and it's doled out millions to friendly officials. According to Open Secrets, George W. Bush got more money from the nuclear energy industry in 2000 than any other federal candidate. In the 2002 election cycle, "the nuclear power industry [gave] \$8.7 million to federal candidates and committees." Seventy percent went to the GOP.

But the nuclear lobby has to do more than buy off legislators; its real challenge is convincing people that a production process that produces tons of the deadliest substances on earth -- waste that stays dangerous for hundreds of thousands of years -- is safe enough to have in their communities. NIMBY is a tall hurdle to clear.

But they're trying. Industry talking points have become ubiquitous on Capitol Hill and in the media; a legion of industry spokespeople repeat the phrase "clean nuclear energy" like a mantra. "Clean" and "green" are always the words of the day.

As the administration's GNEP moves forward, they've stepped up the PR. In January NEI [retained PR giant Hill & Knowlton](#) to handle an \$8 million campaign to build "policymaker and decision-maker support for nuclear energy broadly and specifically for the Yucca Mountain project." In February, the [Wall Street Journal reported](#) that NEI was preparing to launch its "clean air campaign," a "multiyear

advertising campaign to build public support for a generation of new plants."

But more disturbing than the industry's traditional public relations efforts is the "silent leadership" it's taken in influencing public opinion. The lobby has been caught [paying reporters](#) to present "industry's side of the story" and [getting university professors to submit op-eds](#) to local newspapers that were "ginned up, assembly-line style, by a Washington, D.C., public relations firm." The lobby helped [develop a new curriculum for high school physics students](#) that was put out by the Department of Energy to promote new nukes. Just this month the lobby set up a big-money [faux environmental group](#) to shill for its policies; it's already [jumped into the debate](#) with a splash.

A potentially fatal lack of imagination

What makes Bush's grand nuclear strategy all the more preposterous is that since 1950, we've been trying -- with zero success -- to figure out what to do with the nuclear waste we already have.

Jon Lamb, writing in [Green Left weekly](#) cited a 1996 National Academy of Sciences estimate that found the cost of reprocessing irradiated fuel from U.S. reactors would easily exceed \$100 billion. Again, that just covers our existing waste.

And that's probably a very low figure. In 2000, the estimated cost of cleaning up just one site, the Hanford nuclear reprocessing facility, was \$4.3 billion. The contract was awarded to Bechtel and, according to Lamb, six years later the estimated cost is "a massive \$50 billion to \$60 billion, with completion of works by 2035."

In 1993, the Department of Energy estimated that the cost of cleaning up the environmental damage from its enormous nuclear weapons complex [could run as high as one trillion dollars](#). Nobody really knows how much it would actually cost.

Nuclear energy, despite what its boosters say, isn't cheap. There's a global shortage of uranium, and prices have skyrocketed from around \$7 per pound to over \$40. In addition to enormous cleanup costs, the capital investment in new plants is high -- too high to get Wall Street to bite. So Joe and Jane Taxpayer will subsidize those capital costs heavily, as they have for years. According to Public Citizen ([PDF](#)), the government shelled out \$115 billion in direct federal subsidies to the industry between 1947 and 1999. To give you a sense of priorities, federal subsidies for wind and solar energy over the same period totaled just \$5.7 billion.

What's more troubling than the fact that corporate interests are driving this "nuclear renaissance" -- the NEI's term -- is that these bankrupt policies appear to be the best our government can come up with. They show us the outer limits of our leaders' imaginations, of their political will to effect real change.

We have real energy problems -- global warming, dwindling petroleum supplies and an unhappy

marriage to petro-dictatorships. The grotesque tragedy is that this costly, cavalier, Nixon-era nuclear vision constitutes the most ambitious proposal we've seen to address them so far. Dwight Eisenhower once said, "If a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it," and that's just what we're doing.

The good news is that Americans have a good deal of horse sense; despite the "clean nukes" campaigns, polls show that two-thirds of Americans oppose new nuclear power. The idea of using nukes for first strikes, or in anything less than an all-out conflagration, is too nutty to even merit a polling question. And Bush's other grand visions have fizzled out and died. Think about Social Security. And who even remembers our epic journey to mars? As the Congress looks at massive deficits and a president that's trying to borrow a nickel's worth of "political capital" from Fox News broadcasters, the bulk of Bush's "nuclear renaissance" will probably, thankfully, die on the vine.

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Democrats and military spending

Posted by: nbrown on May 2, 2006 12:24 AM [\[Report this comment\]](#)

Too bad this article is partisan. Do alternet readers deserve the truth?

The truth is that the Democratic Party is 100% onboard with military budgets. If you want to stop this nuclear madness, stop making the DOD the most important part of government. That goes for Republicans AND Democrats.

And stop invading countries and killing people! The Dems are fully down for this, which greatly increases the nuclear threat from other governments.

If you want to see some of the damage done by the Iraq war, have a look at these [Iraq war photos](#). These are real people! You can't just go to other countries and create madness!

So long as people write partisan commentary that excludes the Democrats from criticism, we'll continue suffering under the military-industrial complex and all it produces: insane budgets, violence, war, and the increased nuclear threat.

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» [RE: Democrats and military spending](#) Posted by: feller

Technology

Posted by: Aussie Kim on May 2, 2006 12:58 AM [[Report this comment](#)]

I was listening to an American scientist on the radio just recently - he commented that if the US pulled 60 years' worth of plastic out of their rubbish dumps, etc, and broke the plastic down into its original components, the petroleum gained would supply the US with 20% of its current oil needs for x number of years. (forgive my vagueness, I cannot remember the time span he gave it)

Also - whatever happened to alternative fuels? Whatever happened to Presidents investing in their own people and their own country? Or has that never happened in the first place?

Why does California use too much electricity despite getting 497 days of sunshine every year? (Apparently, no one in that state even hangs their washing out to dry in the backyard because washing lines indicate poverty and bring land prices down! Talk about lazy and shallow!)

And where are your nuclear power plants going to sit? On the San Andreas fault? In the path of hurricanes or tornadoes?

AND where are you going to get the money, anyway? You ain't got any - trillions of dollars worth of debt (no wonder Bush is threatening Iran after their president decided to trade oil using Euros), a war that will never end (and should never have started). Where will you get the money - from the oil companies???

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Stop the Hysteria

Posted by: feller on May 2, 2006 1:23 AM [[Report this comment](#)]

The US has a dangerous phobia about nuclear power that it can no longer afford. Nuclear is clean safe and reliable. Dozens of nations are building nuclear plants. We haven't built a new plant in decades. Our current plants are safe and provide carbon free cheap power not dependent on coal or oil.

Presidential leadership and congressional courage is necessary to assert majority rule over a small but influential band of Hollywood radicals and wacko scientists who fight any technology that will assure American security. America is not going to become a low-tech, organic farm based society. We need and will use every increasing amounts of energy to have the level of prosperity a democratic society requires. Nuclear is the key to that prosperity and democracy.

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