

## ***OBAMA, NUKES, AND US***

**By Michael Ventura**

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Campaigning in the primaries in December 2007, Sen. Barack Obama told an Iowa audience about “the only nuclear legislation I’ve passed.” His Illinois constituents had raised hell when they discovered Exelon Corp. routinely did not disclose leaks at an Illinois nuclear plant. Obama said he got right on it, chastised Exelon publicly, then wrote and passed a bill that required nuclear plants to notify states and localities of any leak, be it ever so small. Said Obama to Iowa, “I just did that last year.”

This puzzled journalists at *The New York Times*. They recalled no such bill because there was no such bill.

Mike McIntire’s front-page report told the real story. Published Feb. 3, 2008, two days before Super Tuesday, it was universally ignored by Obama’s supporters and the media, but in light of on-going calamities at Japan’s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, Obama’s relationship with the nuclear industry must not be forgotten.

He did write a tough bill. At first, it seemed he’d fight for it. Then Exelon got to him. Exactly how that went, *The Times* did not report, but the results were clear: Obama’s rewritten bill “removed language mandating prompt reporting and simply offered guidance to regulators, whom it charged with addressing the issue of unreported leaks.”

“‘Senator Obama’s staff was sending us copies of the bill to review, and we could see it weakening with each successive draft,’ said Joe Cosgrove, a park district director in Will County, Ill., where low-level radioactive runoff had turned up in the groundwater. ‘The teeth were just taken out of it.’

“‘On one side were neighbors of several nuclear plants upset that low-level radioactive leaks had gone unreported for years; on the other was Exelon, the country’s largest nuclear plant operator and one of Mr. Obama’s largest sources of campaign money.’”

How much money? “[A]t least \$227,000” as of the article’s publication. In addition, “[t]wo top Exelon officials... are among [Obama’s] largest fund-raisers. Another Obama donor... is also chairman of the Nuclear Energy Institute, the nuclear power industry’s lobby group.”

Obama’s campaign claimed the bill was a success because it prompted a promise from the nuclear industry to report leaks voluntarily.

Gee, thanks. That’s what I’ll bet my life on: nuclear industry promises.

What upset Obama’s Illinois constituents? It started when a radioactive element called tritium showed up in a drinking water well near Exelon’s “Braidwood plant, about 60 miles southwest of Chicago. ...[T]he levels did not exceed federal safety standards.”

That’s a comfort. As long as it’s somebody else’s well.

“Exelon believed the tritium came from millions of gallons of water that had leaked from the plant years earlier but went unreported at the time.” Millions. And notice “years earlier.” Radioactive elements stay radioactive for years – sometimes for thousands of years.

“Under nuclear commission rules, plants are required to tell state and local authorities only about radioactive discharges that rise to the level of an emergency.” Millions of gallons of radioactive water do not rise to the commission’s level of emergency. Good to know.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission “told Mr. Obama’s staff that the [original] bill would have forced the unnecessary disclosure of leaks that were not serious. ‘Unplanned releases below the level of emergency present a substantially smaller risk to the public,’ the agency said.”

Smaller than what? That statement implicitly admits risk, but the risk is OK according to the commission because it is smaller than bigger risks. Notice how the commission refuses to be specific about the actual risk. And what exactly is an “unplanned release”? Sounds like an accident, doesn’t it?

“The rewritten bill also contained new wording sought by Exelon making it clear that state and local authorities would have no regulatory oversight of nuclear power plants.” In the Obama-Exelon bill, the people most endangered would have the least say. In fact, they’d have no say at all.

Obama told Iowa voters his bill required “all plant owners to notify state and local authorities immediately of even small leaks.” He also told them it passed. It did neither.

Fast-forward two years.

“In Mr. Obama’s State of the Union address and in his budget, he proposed an expansion of nuclear energy technology and \$36 billion in Department of Energy loan guarantees for the construction of as many as 20 new nuclear plants” (*The New York Times*, March 14, p.A11). That is, the loans will be guaranteed by Mr. and Ms. Taxpayer. Congress will likely go along, because “[n]uclear industry firms and their employees [have] contributed more than \$4.6 million in the last decade to members of Congress – both Republican and Democrat... And the industry has spent tens of millions more lately on lobbying” (*The New York Times*, March 25, p.A8).

Same article: Pete Lyons, the nuclear scientist who played a central role in the push for Congress to accept nuclear energy as environmentally “clean,” “has been nominated by Mr. Obama to run the Energy Department’s civilian nuclear program. ... There is no doubt about where the Energy Department stands. Its Web site extols the value of nuclear energy.” Yet “[t]here have been dozens of instances since 1979, the year of the Three Mile Island accident, in which nuclear reactors have had to be shut down for more than a year for safety reasons” (*The New York Times*, March 19, p.A23).

“[A]lmost half of the [104] nuclear reactors in the U.S. are within 50 miles of a metropolitan area with more than 500,00 people” (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 24, p.A3). “American nuclear safety regulators ... determined that the simultaneous failure of both emergency shutdown systems to prevent a core meltdown was so unlikely that it would happen once every 17,000 years. ... [I]t happened twice in four days at a pair of nuclear reactors in southern New Jersey” (*The New York Times*, March 29, p.D1).

“Almost all American nuclear power plants have backup batteries that would last only half as long as those at Japan’s troubled Fukushima Daiichi plant did” (*The New York Times*, March 30, p.A6). But “William Borchardt, the chief staff official of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, said that the Fukushima crisis would have no impact on the commission’s granting new licenses or license extensions” (same article).

Borchardt’s statement implies that he knows what happened at Fukushima when, in fact, it’s been widely reported that it could be years before we know all the details of the breakdown, if we ever know. The breakdown, as I write, isn’t over. But Obama’s Nuclear Regulatory Commission has decided in advance that it will have “no impact.”

“Exelon, Largest Nuclear Reactor Owner, Seeks to Reassure,” went the headline of a story on page B4 of March 25’s *New York Times*. “None of the 10 Exelon plant sites is in a zone of high seismic activity, the company said.” Funny thing about seismic activity: “The deadly earthquakes in New Zealand last year; in Northridge, Calif., in 1994; and in Santa Cruz, Calif., in 1989 all happened along faults that scientists were unaware of until the ground shook” (*The New York Times*, March 22, p.D1).

“Nuclear power plants in the United States are not reporting some equipment failures to the government because of badly written rules, the inspector general of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has warned. ... In another development, federal authorities announced that a subcontractor at the Watts Bar nuclear plant under construction in Tennessee had been accused of lying about making crucial measurements on cables that carry power to safety systems there” (*The New York Times*, March 25, p.B4).

Safe? Clean? A line from *The Outlaw Josey Wales* comes to mind:

“Don’t piss down my back and tell me it’s raining.”

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