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New AEC Broom Begins to Sweep

by our Washington Correspondent

THE nuclear power industry is by now used to accusations that it is abusing the natural environment and endangering the health of countless Americans. Mere accusations that its quality control and safety standards are not all they might be would, in normal circumstances, scarcely merit a single raised eyebrow, but last week these accusations caused considerable consternation in the nuclear industry, for they were made by James R. Schlesinger, the new chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. And, to rub salt in the industry's wounds, Schlesinger added that the nuclear companies need not look to the AEC to fight their battles, for the commission's most important job will be to protect the interests of the public.

These remarks were made not to an appreciative audience of environmentalists, but to representatives of the nuclear industry itself who listened with growing alarm to what Dr Schlesinger had to say in his first public speech. The remarks have been widely interpreted as marking a fundamental shift in the AEC's policies, but what they mean in effect is that the Atomic Energy Commission is fully prepared to stand by the new regulatory procedures set up in response to the appeals court decision on the Calvert Cliffs reactor (see *Nature*, 233, 85; 1971). In a sense, Dr Schlesinger will be seeking during the next few years to build up public confidence in the AEC's power to regulate the nuclear industry, and in so doing, he is likely to help the cause of nuclear power much more effectively than by siding with the nuclear industry.

The burden of Dr Schlesinger's message was that the nuclear industry has now grown past the stage at which it needs to be nurtured by the AEC, and that it ought now to be capable of standing on its own feet. "From its inception, the Atomic Energy Commission has fostered and protected the nuclear industry," he said. "Looking back, one can, I think, say that this was the right policy for that historical epoch . . . but that industry should now be on a self-sustaining basis. Those of you who regard the response to Calvert Cliffs as indicating a climatic change in the relationship between the industry and the AEC could well be right, though perhaps for the wrong reason. The move toward greater self-reliance for the

industry had a certain historic inevitability."

The AEC has been consistently criticized in the past for allowing nuclear power companies to get away with sub-standard engineering and in consequence the purchasing utilities have bought plants which are unduly susceptible to breakdown and poor performance. But in future, if Dr Schlesinger lives up to the promises made in his speech, the AEC will tighten its control considerably over important but unglamorous engineering details. "The AEC's role is . . . primarily to serve the public interest," Dr Schlesinger told his audience, and "those engineering details are the heart of the problem". The AEC will need to be assured that piping is of the highest quality, that pumps work and that valves are properly designed. "Those in industry who have chided us—quite properly—about the AEC regulatory process know full well that you have reason to blush regarding some of these aspects of quality assurance," Dr Schlesinger told his audience.

But the AEC will not expect to fight all the battles for the purchasing utilities for ever, for Dr Schlesinger told them they should acquire the technical expertise and trained personnel to make sure that they receive good value for their money from the builders of power plants. If the utilities acquire this expertise, it will help "to avoid power disruptions, to insure that plants can and will be properly maintained and, among other things, to avoid relying on the Atomic Energy Commission to perform this critical task".

Much of what Dr Schlesinger had to say was a bitter pill for his audience to swallow, and the nuclear power industry could perhaps be excused for choking on some of his suggestions, if only because they are reminiscent of many of the charges levelled at the industry by some of its more vocal opponents. Indeed, Dr Schlesinger had more than a good word to say for the environmentalists who have pitted their armour against the industry in the past. "A number have bad manners," he said, "but I believe that broadside diatribes against environmentalists to be not only in bad taste but wrong. I believe that we shall receive from responsible environmentalists considerable assistance in resolving our present diffi-

culties." Dr Schlesinger refused even to be drawn into the argument over whether or not society ought to curb its appetite for nuclear power, saying that "it would be inappropriate for the Atomic Energy Commission to take a position on this issue".

In a sense, the AEC has already demonstrated to the nuclear industry its new role, for in spite of great industrial pressure to appeal against the Calvert Cliffs decision, the AEC chose instead to amend its regulations. Dr Schlesinger pointed out that the new regulations present no insuperable difficulties, and "while they are tough, they are workable". He chided the nuclear industry for advising the AEC to evade the court mandate, saying "it is not the AEC's responsibility to ignore on your behalf an indication of Congressional intent". There is a clear option open to the industry if it believes the new regulations to be too harsh, and that is through the courts. There will evidently be nothing to be gained by complaining to the AEC itself.

Finally, Dr Schlesinger set about dismantling a popular misconception. "It is not the responsibility of the AEC to supply power," he said, and he went on to infer that those who have criticized the AEC for fostering the demand for electricity would do better levelling their complaints at the utilities themselves. "The AEC does not sell power reactors. We are a bystander, sympathetic I trust. The selling of power reactors is a concern of the vendors: the decision to buy that of the utilities."

Set against remarks made by Dr Glenn Seaborg, Dr Schlesinger's predecessor as chairman of the AEC, Dr Schlesinger's speech marks a change of attitude, if not of policy. In a speech to the International Platform Association, in July, for example, Dr Seaborg had little hesitation in jumping into the debate about society's need for power, and he spent much of his speech extolling the virtues of nuclear power as opposed to other forms of energy.

Why did Dr Schlesinger choose to hit out so strongly and controversially in his first public pronouncements as head of the AEC? Perhaps one answer lies in his statement that "it is to industry's long run advantage that the public has high confidence that the AEC will appropriately perform its role".