

nature

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Carter's nuclear moves

THIS week, President Carter is set to unveil his much heralded and extensively leaked energy policy. He has been warning for weeks that its emphasis on conservation and its moves to increase energy prices will be politically unpopular, a fact vividly confirmed last weekend when, even before the policy was officially released, it came under attack in three separate television interviews given by Senator William Proxmire, the consumer advocate Ralph Nader and the Republican National Committee Chairman William Brock—people whose political philosophies span a wide spectrum.

Clearly, it will be a severe test of the fledgling Administration's political skills to push the energy proposals through a Congress which is all too aware that soaring energy prices may swiftly translate into plunging electoral votes. Nevertheless, Carter has suggested that he is willing to try, even at the expense of a few percentage points in his popularity rating.

While Carter's domestic energy proposals are running into heavy fire at home, his efforts to curb nuclear proliferation have been attracting equally fierce and often self-interested attacks abroad. The non-proliferation proposals, announced in advance of the other energy proposals, have been criticised unofficially by some West European governments who grumble that the United States may be trying to keep them out of a lucrative business in which they have a technological lead. And it has been attacked in some developing nations as an attempt by the United States to maintain the gap between rich and poor.

First, it is important to understand just what Carter did and did not say. There was nothing very surprising in his announcement, for Carter had signalled his punch months ago during campaign speeches and in some previous Presidential pronouncements. It was not a comprehensive, detailed discussion of major proposals. Instead, Carter simply stated several policy options which his Administration intends to pursue. They are:

- The United States will defer indefinitely the commercial reprocessing of fuel from power reactors and the recycling of plutonium. This means that no federal aid will be supplied to start up a reprocessing plant built by private industry in South Carolina, and that plant may well be mothballed before it even starts operating.
- The liquid metal fast breeder programme, which has previously enjoyed pride of place as the highest priority energy research and development programme in the United States, will be scaled down and restructured to give more emphasis to research and less to development of demonstration reactors. The programme will not be scrapped, however.

- More funds will be put into research on alternative nuclear fuel cycles, such as the thorium cycle, which may pose less risk of proliferation.

- The United States will increase its production capacity for enriched uranium in order to provide assurances to countries which agree not to develop nuclear weapons of adequate fuel supplies well into the future, the objective being to try to dissuade other nations from building their own enrichment and reprocessing plants to ensure their fuel supplies.

- The United States will continue to embargo export of equipment or technology that would permit enrichment or reprocessing by non-nuclear weapons states.

- Discussions with both nuclear exporters and importers will continue, and the United States is willing to explore various arrangements aimed at developing international fuel cycle facilities and access to spent fuel storage facilities for countries sharing non-proliferation objectives.

The only new policies announced are the renunciation of domestic reprocessing by the United States and the sharp reduction in efforts on the breeder reactor programme, both of which are important precursors to international non-proliferation talks. The proposal to defer domestic reprocessing was strongly urged recently by a committee established by the Ford Foundation, whose report seems to have provided the basis of Carter's policy. The reasoning, which is persuasive, is that if the United States pursues domestic reprocessing while trying to dissuade others from doing so, it would be accused of setting a double standard and its credibility would be destroyed. Moreover, since the United States has relatively large coal and uranium resources, the incentive to reprocess is small, at best.

Carter quickly acknowledged that other industrial countries might see their own domestic programmes in a different light, since their future energy supplies might not be so stable as those of the United States. Nevertheless, the onus is now on those countries which intend to reprocess to discuss publicly the reasons which compel them to push ahead at the possible expense of some lessening of control over proliferation.

The next opportunity to discuss these matters in an international forum will be at the secret talks between nuclear suppliers which are due to resume in London in the next few weeks. Carter's statement, released a month before the talks are scheduled to resume, has set the stage for the talks and it has provided plenty of opportunity for a more thoughtful response by European governments than the mostly self-serving reactions which have been voiced unofficially so far. □