

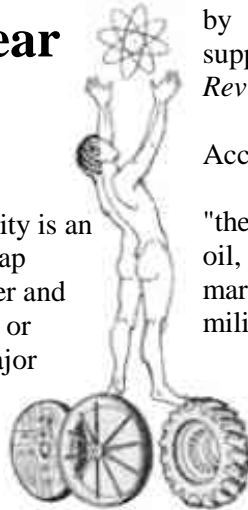
The Case for Nuclear Energy

By David Ramsay Steele

Atomic generation of electricity is an inexhaustible bounty of cheap power. It is enormously safer and more benign, in terms of past record or future probability, than any of its major rivals. Consequently, opposition to nuclear energy is little short of murderous.

That it should be fought by socialists is no more than we should expect. Time was when socialism presented itself as a progressive force capable of bringing the Benefits of Civilisation to the masses. In those days socialists thought that Big was Beautiful, and claimed they knew the way to make everyone better off materially, at a stroke. Returning to its origins as the last desperate stratagem of conservative reaction against the liberal social revolution, socialism is increasingly opposed to modern industry as such. Instead of intoning that capitalism is a fetter on the forces of Production, our modern socialists complain that the forces of production are unfettered, and promise that socialism will clap them in irons. It is no surprise that most of them have lined up against nuclear power.

But what are we to make of a *Libertarian* organisation which stridently execrates nuclear power, with no qualification whatsoever? It is Students for a Libertarian Society, active on a large and growing number of US campuses, and doing a useful job in mobilising resistance to the re-introduction of military conscription (now being vigorously promoted by influential sections of the ruling class) S.L.S's anti-nuclear propaganda makes depressing reading. It is so bad that we must hope it will be totally unsuccessful, for it will not be an advantage to the libertarian movement to recruit into its ranks anyone attracted by such drivel. I select one example of this literature, somewhat less irrational than the others, in which a thread of argument can be discerned: "Nuclear Power and The Bomb",



by Milton Mueller (*Liberty* special supplement, to be reprinted in *Libertarian Review*.)

According to Mueller, nuclear energy is:

"the bastard child of The Bomb not like oil, an energy source well established in the market economy and then appropriated for military ends.... nuclear power plants were designed because the government held in its hands the awesome power of The Bomb and decided *afterwards* that something constructive had to be done with it".

The theme running through Mueller's piece is that nuclear energy is intimately related to the government, and especially the military. This theme has several variations:

- (1) The government invented nuclear power for military ends;
- (2) Nuclear power is still run by the state, and still has military links;
- (3) Peaceful nuclear energy is used as an argument to defend The Bomb.

These arguments are thoroughly superstitious. There is supposed to be something inherent in government introduction, promotion and direction of a particular technique which renders it essentially statist and evil. Mueller writes that there "were no nuclear power entrepreneurs and no 'market' for nuclear power plants in 1954". But *would* there have been such a market if the state had permitted it? Never mind. He concludes: "a domestic energy source built upon the research and technology of a federal nuclear weapons complex is *necessarily* an industry that will be subject to large doses of centralised authoritarian state control" (Mueller's own emphasis, believe it or not)

As a Libertarian, Mueller favours the denationalisation of streets and roads. There were no entrepreneurs producing transcontinental highways or city street complexes in 1954, nor are there today (except to state contract, like the nuclear

power industry). Does this mean we have to oppose streets and roads *per se*?

Mueller presents much evidence for the fact, disputed by no one, that nuclear energy has been promoted by politicians, who have repeatedly linked it with nuclear weapons. He then triumphantly concludes that this industry is *necessarily* a tool of war and the state. Necessity, not contingency, is what Mueller has to demonstrate, but precisely here he presents no evidence and no argument.

Radar was devised by researchers in the British state postal service, who passed it on to the military, who in turn developed it and used it to defeat the German state. The Second World War was decided more by radar than by nuclear bombs, and it is not at all fantastic that the Third World War might be too. Radar was begotten by the state, born of the state, fed at the state's teat, weaned and potty-trained by the state, told bed-time stories by the state and sent to school with sandwiches and a kiss each morning by the state. Radar still lives cheek by jowl with the state, and only ventures out into the big wide world of the free market to earn a little extra pocket money. Modern radar is not the bastard child of World War II radar. It is the self-same person. Unlike the case of nuclear-generated electricity, which has little intrinsically to do with H-Bombs, radar in peace is, technically, identical with radar in war.

What Libertarian would say that because of its pedigree, radar is "*necessarily* an industry that will be subject to large doses of centralised state control"? Obviously, radar will be used in the free market, perhaps less than today, perhaps more. Obviously, it is a potential benefit for humankind, and its history is utterly irrelevant. Technology is not statist or Libertarian any more than science is proletarian or bourgeois.

But Muller has made the astounding discovery that the worthwhileness of a technology is to be evaluated according, to the motives of those who sponsor it, or even of those who first introduced it. Startling consequences follow from this extraordinary principle. Galileo calculated the area of

cannon-balls. Archimedes designed war machines. Euler wrote a treatise on artillery. How much of science is tainted at source, the illegitimate offspring of war, branded forever with a Mark of Cain!

The overwhelming majority of the Libertarian movement is, with various degrees of passion, pro-nuclear. Yet, as fellow Libertarians, we all share with S.L.S. the same fundamental energy policy. Neither privileges nor persecution for atomic power. Leave it to the people, through the market, to choose. This raised two points:

(1) The S.L.S. writers ought to make more clear that this is their standpoint. We ought not to require a microscope to distinguish their position from that of the anti-nuclear movement, which wishes to employ coercion to ban nuclear energy (and in many cases, any kind of energy except mules and windmills). Surely it is only fair for their anti-nuclear readers to be informed that S.L.S. stands for a society in which anyone will be free to open a nuclear power plant, without supervision or state licensing of any kind.

(2) Since S.L.S. members are Libertarians, the only possible interpretation of their categorical opposition to nuclear power is that they believe there would not be any demand for it in a free society. But they don't seriously argue for this. S.L.S. scoffs at the claim, once made, that nuclear-generated electricity would be "too cheap to meter", but they do not contest the fact that it is cheap. In the U.K. at present, to produce nuclear-generated electricity costs about half as much as any other method. Some of this might be attributed to government discrimination against oil, but not all. The real cost of nuclear production is likely to fall steadily, that of fossil produced electricity may very well arise. Furthermore, S.L.S. cannot be unaware of the well-established Libertarian analysis of pollution: that definition and enforcement of property rights in air, water, etc., will raise the costs of environmental damage, minimising it and ensuring that those who cause it pay those who suffer it. This means that a free market would precipitate a substantial rise in the cost of producing electricity from fossil fuels

(which inflicts massive environmental damage), whilst scarcely affecting the cost of nuclear power (which, by comparison, causes an insignificant amount of environmental damage). Nor should we forget the ill effects of electricity production from fossil fuels on those who work in the industry. They are free to work somewhere else, but that is no reason not to rejoice that a far healthier working environment is now available for electricity producers. As real incomes rise, monetary benefits will be valued less highly compared with non-monetary benefits (like pleasant and safe working conditions), another way in which the free market will tip the balance yet further towards nuclear power.

A tiny handful of (unknown) people die each year because of the nuclear generation of electricity. Thousands die every month because of the fossil generation of electricity. Many of these are known individuals who work in the industry (miners with lung disease, etc.). No one has ever died from working in the nuclear power industry. (Large-scale industry which kills no one is unfortunately not an option. The *absence* of large-scale industry would kill nearly everyone.)

So much for Mueller's argument. He interlards it with fallacious smears which, since he is honest, must be the result of militant ignorance. Take his remark that the state, possessing "The Bomb", decided something "had to be done with it". What is "it"? A bomb is not a nuclear power plant, and can not be turned into a nuclear power plant. A nuclear power plant is not a bomb, and cannot be turned into a bomb. It is not necessary to have atomic bombs in order to produce nuclear power; neither is it necessary to have nuclear power in order to produce atomic bombs. To be sure, they are both 'nuclear', just as germ warfare and peanut farming are both 'biological', mace gas and Ajax are both 'chemical', swords and ploughshares are both 'metallic'. Mueller writes of "global commerce in plutonium - a dangerously toxic nuclear explosive". Plutonium is not an explosive in the only sense which an ingenuous reader of Mueller would infer: that it could blow up in the course of "global commerce". 'Toxic' just means poisonous. So it is the business of

Libertarians to prevent trade in poison. Numerous poisons are being carted round the world, some of them of higher toxicity than plutonium. There are other substances and things being traded globally which are dangerous in other ways, for example being liable to catch fire, explode, asphyxiate people, infect them with disease, or (far and away the worst killers) kill people by impact, by falling on top of them, or by people falling off them. Plutonium has substantial advantages compared with most other dangers.. It can be confined in a very small area, and its presence can always be quickly detected with 100% accuracy. Similar to Mueller's is the argument that cars should be banned because they kill people, but that argument is immeasurably stronger. There are millions-fold more cars than consignments of plutonium, and the chances that any given car will kill someone are millions-fold greater than the chances that any given consignment of plutonium will kill someone.

We don't handle dangerous stuff for the fun of it. We do it for the benefits, including the saving of lives and health, which follow. This especially applies to cheap electricity, which will save the lives of millions of people in the poorer countries. The glorious beneficence of nuclear energy arises partly from its compactness, such a tiny amount of raw material can release so much useful power. Plutonium has its dangers. Though unexceptional, they are respectable. But only a very small quantity of plutonium needs to be employed. Thus the ration of hazards to benefits is extremely small.

S.L.S. talked airily of "energy alternatives which the Power Elite has struggled to keep off the market" but doesn't inform us (or the world scientific community) what these are. (The same article correctly debates the pretensions of solar energy.) The only major alternative to nuclear power is reliance on fossil fuels. The state has not exactly kept its fingers to itself in that department, either.

The writings of Petr Beckman are very well-known throughout the Libertarian movement, but if S.L.S. have produced a critique of Beckmann, it has been inadequately publicised. U.S. Libertarians may not be aware that Britain has some very

able proponents of nuclear power, notably Adrian Berry, Fred Hoyle, John Maddox and John Fremlin. Fremlin is an interesting case. In the 1960s, when the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was at its height, Fremlin (one of the world's leading experts on radiation risks) jeopardised his reputation, and possibly his career, by his uncompromising outspokenness on behalf of C.N.D. whose objectives included British unilateral nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from NATO. He has not changed his views on these matters, though public disquiet about nuclear weapons has (unjustifiably) died down, and C.N.D. with it. C.N.D. still jogs along, however, and predictably enough, since it is filled with socialists and other technophobes, fiercely opposes the nuclear production of electricity. Yet, in their anti-nuclear propaganda, C.N.D. along with 'Friends of the Earth' (well-known enemies of all energy consumers), have given space for the dissenting view of Fremlin which is presented so cogently that it makes nonsense of the surrounding anti-nuclear fulminations ('Broadsheet', supplement to *Sanity*, June/July 1978). S.L.S. should make a similar gesture, and take a similar risk. Let them provide space in their publications for the free market pro-nuclear case. If they can not bring themselves to do that, let them at least pause in their demagoguery to present a reasoned rebuttal of (to begin with) Petr Beckmann

If they persist in their foolish course, S.L.S. may identify Libertarianism with the clowns of the anti-nuclear movement. They may even contribute significantly to the postponement of nuclear power programmes throughout the West, in which case they will be responsible for the needless deaths of thousands, and reduced wellbeing of millions.

If S.L.S. operated in a backward and impoverished country like the United Kingdom, I would not hesitate to offer a more mundane argument: take a good look at your next electricity bill. But maybe that wouldn't cut much ice on the Berkeley Campus.