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Decision Not To Build a Nuclear-Waste Incinerator: What Goes Up in Smoke?

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Title: Decision Not To Build a Nuclear-Waste Incinerator: What Goes Up in Smoke?

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Abstract. This article explores the political psychology of a decision not to build a nuclear-waste incinerator in the United States.

The United States Department of Energy (DOE) recently has announced that it would not build what would have been the US's first nuclear-waste incinerator. The incinerator was to have been built in southern Idaho. The decision has been hailed by most environmentalists because the incinerator might have been the source of radioactive and toxic dust that might have spread from southern Idaho across western Wyoming. However, there is a disturbing political psychology concerning the DOE decision.

The main opposition group was developed and nurtured by US citizens who form a social, cultural, economic, and political elite--many with interests in the resort community of Jackson, Wyoming. One must seriously entertain the notion that the driving factor in this elite's opposition was a narcissistic sense of entitlement and self-interest concerning a style of life, property values, and potential health hazards to their own kind.

Sometimes one's sense of entitlement and self-interest--when it comes in contact with that of others--can foster a burning synergy that engages an analysis of all aspects of a policy Issue and drives a behavioral intention for the Good beyond the self. Too often, however, only the Good for the self is a focus. This has serious consequences for a nation-state that strives to comply with the goal of emulating a representative democracy.

The clout of the elite increases the probability that the resolution of the nuclear waste problem is grounded in an area populated by people who are neither the rich nor the famous. This becomes almost an insidious phenomenon if one infers the intent to do exactly that from the settlement between the DOE and the successful opposition to the incinerator. The settlement stipulates that the DOE Secretary appoint a panel of experts to explore alternatives of incineration as a method of nuclear waste disposal. Unfortunately, the seasons of an expert panel's life too often lead to another dusty tome for another dusty shelf. (There are exceptions as National Aeronautics and Space Administration administrators would note dealing with their Mars exploration programs). Meanwhile, the problem of nuclear waste festers and the pressures to resolve it are increasingly contaminated with pressures to prevent the resolution's consequences from being physically proximal to one's own life.

Both the political clout of the elite and the lack thereof of others subvert the essential existential dilemma of being a witting member of a representative democracy. Phenomenologically and behaviorally sharing in governance and balancing the pros and cons of various positions for the greater, if not greatest, good becomes irrelevant. What eventually goes up in smoke may not be nuclear waste, but it is representative democracy that becomes wasted. (See Burger, J., et al. (1998). Gender differences in recreational use, environmental attitudes, and perceptions of future land use at the Savannah River Site. *Environment and Behavior*, 30, 472-486; Garrick, B. J., & Kaplan, S. (1999). A decision theory perspective on the disposal of high-level radioactive waste. *Risk Analysis*, 19, 903-913; Janofsky, M. (March 27, 2000). U.S. abandons plan to build a nuclear-waste incinerator. *The New York*

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Times, p. A12; Summers, C., & Hine, D. W. (1997). Nuclear waste goes on the road: Risk perceptions and compensatory tradeoffs in single-industry communities. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 29, 211-223.) (Keywords: Department of Energy, Nuclear Waste, Representative Democracy.)