

Colin Powell: Conned or Con-Man?

Exclusive: A decade ago, President George W. Bush was hurtling toward an aggressive war against a country not threatening the United States. Only a few people had a chance to stop the rush to war with Iraq, but one Colin Powell instead joined the stampede, recalls ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Ten years ago, Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nations in a speech which routed what was left of American resistance to the Bush/Cheney push for invading Iraq. The next day, the Washington Post's editorial pages spoke for the conventional wisdom, filled with glowing reviews of Powell's convincing arguments.

Today, of course, we know that much of what Powell said on Feb. 5, 2003, was wrong. He himself has acknowledged that the speech was a "blot" on his record.

We also know that then-CIA Director George Tenet and his deputy John McLaughlin knew full well that key data that they were giving Powell was highly dubious or outright fraudulent. It was not simply "mistaken," as George W. Bush and his careerist defenders still claim.

There is also circumstantial evidence that Powell was a willing co-conspirator, despite his repeated insistence that he didn't know he was spreading falsehoods to justify an aggressive (and thus illegal) war. It's clear that he was eager to please his bosses and thus was predisposed to do whatever he was told.

But the question remains: Was Powell a full-fledged participant in the fraud or was he duped by CIA officials who were taking direction from Vice President Dick Cheney and other war hawks? It seems to me likely that Tenet and McLaughlin (and in a larger sense Bush and Cheney) exploited Powell's long-held tendency toward careerism (or as his acolytes put it, "being a good soldier") to easily overcome Powell's misgivings.

From his days as a young officer in Vietnam through his long climb up the ladder of the U.S. national security bureaucracy, Powell never bucked the system. Indeed, that's the secret to understanding how Powell ascended to become a four-star general, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Secretary of State.

Whether the question was joining other early Vietnam military advisers in warning President Lyndon Johnson about the hopelessness of that conflict, or participating in President Ronald Reagan's illegal Iran-Contra operation, or finding less violent ways to deal with international disputes under President

George H.W. Bush, Powell consistently chose to be a yes man and do what his bosses wanted. [For details on Powell's past, see the book, *Neck Deep*.]

Jury Still Out

Still, in my view, the jury is still out on whether Powell was more conned regarding the Iraq War than con-man. Like anyone else, he is entitled to some benefit of the doubt, though to this day he has resisted providing any comprehensive explanation of his deceptive speech or admitting that the invasion of Iraq was wrong.

Powell has limited himself to some handwringing about how the speech was a "blot" on his record, not that it contributed to the unnecessary deaths of nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. He still insists that the war was justified.

It's also true that Powell remains one of the important links in the chain of excuses used to fend off allegations of war crimes against the architects of the invasion. As long as each link in that chain doesn't admit wrongdoing and points to the link in the chain next to him or her as providing justification for whatever was done, no single link can be found guilty and surely not the entire chain.

The Bush-Cheney team used a similar chain of reinforcing justification to evade responsibility for illegal torture. The CIA's torturers point to authorization from the CIA brass, which points to approval from Bush and other senior White House officials, who point to the Justice Department lawyers who created legal excuses and other evasions, some of which were suggested by the CIA torturers, the CIA brass and the White House officials.

Thus, regarding the false testimony on the Iraq War, Powell resists stating clearly that Tenet and McLaughlin lied to his face or admitting that he agreed to deliver the deceptions with his trademark gravitas and sincerity because he wanted to stay in President Bush's good graces.

Slam or Sham Dunk?

Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, Powell's chief of staff at the time, has described his boss as dubious about elements of the intelligence that he was getting from not only Vice President Cheney's office but from the CIA.

Surely, Powell understood that the intelligence on Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's links to Islamist terrorism was weak and that evidence of his "weapons of mass destruction" was far from a "slam dunk," as Tenet famously assured President Bush on Dec. 21, 2002. The appropriate adjective would have been sham, not slam.

Even Bush has said he was underwhelmed at McLaughlin's presentation of the evidence that day and put a must-do-better on the CIA's report card. So, with their wrists slapped at the White House, Tenet and McLaughlin returned to the CIA and redoubled their efforts to fulfill their role in this chain of self-reinforcing arguments for giving Bush and his neocon advisers their war of choice in Iraq.

At CIA's Langley headquarters, McLaughlin and Tenet swept up every scrap of dubious intelligence and assembled it to justify war. The significance of the CIA's role in this perverted process became clear to CIA analysts on Feb. 5, 2003, when they saw Tenet sitting solemnly behind Powell as the Secretary of State exaggerated the evidence on WMD and spoke of a "sinister nexus" between Iraq and al-Qaeda, the other key "justification" adduced for war on Iraq.

CIA analysts at the working level had stood firm against the alleged al-Qaeda link and thought they had successfully beaten back "intelligence" conjured up by Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld pointing to operational ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

Rumsfeld described the evidence as "bulletproof" though Gen. Brent Scowcroft, then chair of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board, labeled it "scant." And the normally taciturn CIA ombudsman came out of the shadows to tell Congress bluntly that never in his 32-year career with the agency had he encountered such "hammering" on CIA analysts to reconsider their judgments on operational ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

Powell's Doubts

According to Wilkerson, Powell recognized how flimsy this evidence was just four days before his UN speech. "Powell and I had a one-on-one, no one else even in the room, about his angst over what was a rather dull recounting of several old stories about Al Qaeda-Baghdad ties [in the draft speech]," Wilkerson said. "I agreed with him that what we had was bull___t, and Powell decided to eliminate all mention of terrorist contacts between AQ and Baghdad.

"Within an hour, [CIA Director George] Tenet and [CIA Deputy Director John] McLaughlin dropped a bombshell on the table in the [CIA] director's Conference Room: a high-level AQ detainee had just revealed under interrogation substantive contacts between AQ and Baghdad, including Iraqis training AQ operatives in the use of chemical and biological weapons."

Though Tenet and McLaughlin wouldn't give Powell the identity of the al-Qaeda source, Wilkerson said he now understands that it was Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi, an al-Qaeda operative who later claimed he gave the CIA false information in the

face of actual and threatened torture.

Not realizing that the new intelligence was tainted, "Powell changed his mind and this information was included in his UNSC presentation, along with some more general information from the previous text about Baghdad's terrorist tendencies," Wilkerson said.

Wilkerson's account underscores how the Bush administration's reliance on harsh interrogations of al-Qaeda suspects influenced the rush to war with Iraq, while also pointing out how the need to justify the war gave impetus to the use of torture for extracting information.

These and other charges in Powell's speech were the kind of consequential fraud that, in my view, should land the perpetrators behind bars. But you don't have to take my word for it.

Senate Cries Foul

In June 2008, the Senate Intelligence Committee issued a bipartisan report based on a five-year investigation of the pre-Iraq-war intelligence. Two of the committee's six Republicans, Chuck Hagel and Olympia Snowe, approved the committee's findings, making the vote 10 to 5.

Committee Chair Jay Rockefeller, D-West Virginia, summed up the findings: "In making the case for war, the Administration repeatedly presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent. As a result, the American people were led to believe that the threat from Iraq was much greater than actually existed."

The report noted that Powell had said, "Every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence." Not so, concluded the committee. The report stressed that, "Much of the information provided or cleared by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for inclusion in Secretary Powell's speech was overstated, misleading, or incorrect."

How might this happen with analysts at the working level, who used to be able to depend on career protection in honoring their ethos of speaking truth to power? One example may suffice.

Here's what we know about the handling of "Curveball," the Iraqi defector who gave German intelligence the fairy tale about mobile biological weapons factories. Remember those vivid "artist renderings" featured in Powell's speech? Beautifully "rendered" mobile laboratories fabricated in the village of Potemkin.

It turns out that only one U.S. analyst had met with the now-completely-discredited Curveball, the source of that fabrication. In a last-ditch attempt to warn his superiors the day before Powell's UN speech, this analyst wrote an e-mail to the deputy director of CIA's Task Force on WMD raising strong doubt regarding Curveball's reliability.

I personally became almost physically ill reading the cynical response from the deputy director of the CIA Task Force, but it is a sign of the mood among CIA's malleable managers at the time.

The deputy director replied: "As I said last night, let's keep in mind the fact that this war's going to happen regardless of what Curveball said or didn't say, and the powers that be probably aren't terribly interested in whether Curveball knows what he's talking about." (That e-mail message and similar material were released in July 2004 by Sen. Dianne Feinstein of the Senate Intelligence Committee.)

Tyler Drumheller, then chief of the European Division of CIA's Directorate of operations, called Tenet the evening before Powell's UN testimony, appalled when he found out that Powell intended to include Curveball's information in his speech, but also was brushed aside by Tenet.

And so, Powell ended up telling the UN Security Council, and the world, that the alleged germ-producing vehicles were "one of the most worrisome things that emerges from the thick intelligence file we have on Iraq."

Was Powell lying? On Curveball, at least, I am inclined to think that Powell was taken in by the shysters at CIA's top level, though you could argue that an experienced old hand like Powell should have known better. He might well have concluded, like the CIA Task Force deputy director, that Bush had long ago made up his mind about invading Iraq and that only a fool would stand in the way.

'Made an Honest Man of Me'

In former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's memoir, *Interventions: A Life in War and Peace*, published last year, Annan reports that several weeks after the March 2003 invasion of Iraq and the embarrassing failure to discover WMD Powell visited the UN to privately exult with Annan over initial reports that U.S. forces believed they finally had found something in Iraq, those mobile weapons laboratories.

"Kofi, they've made an honest man of me," Powell declared, according to an excerpt from the book.

Writing about Powell's demeanor, Annan noted that "The relief, and the

exhaustion, was palpable. I could not help but smile along with my friend, and wanted to share in his comfort," even though Annan remained dubious. "I could only be impressed by the resilience of this man, who had endured so much to argue for a war he clearly did not believe in."

On May 29, 2003, President Bush, while visiting Poland, also jumped at the prospect that his WMD claims had been vindicated. He declared on Polish TV, "We have found the weapons of mass destruction."

But these supposed mobile weapons labs turned out to be more sham dunk. Under mounting pressure to point to some WMD proof in Iraq, CIA analysts misrepresented a tractor-trailer outfitted to inflate balloons used for artillery as one of the promised mobile bio-labs.

On May 28, 2003, CIA analysts had cooked up a fraudulent six-page report claiming that the trailer was proof that they had been right about Iraq's "bio-weapons labs" after all. They then performed what we Army officers used to call a "night-time requisition," getting the only Defense Intelligence Agency analyst sympathetic to their position to provide DIA "coordination," to make the discovery look more legit.

When the State Department's intelligence analysts learned of this subterfuge, they "went ballistic," according to their Director, Carl Ford. It fell to Ford to tell Powell there was a serious problem that the President had been misinformed and that no bio weapons lab had been found.

When Tenet learned that Ford would not be part of the team that he would not become one of the links in the chain the CIA director called Ford on the carpet, literally, the following day. No shrinking violet, Ford held his ground at CIA headquarters, telling Tenet and McLaughlin, "That report is one of the worst intelligence assessments I've ever read."

This vignette, and several like it, are found in *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War* by Michael Isikoff and David Corn, who say Ford was still angry over the fraudulent paper years later. Indeed, Ford told the book's authors that Tenet and McLaughlin had taken a personal hand in this abortive attempt to salvage some credibility for the notorious Curveball.

Ford told the authors: "It was clear that they [Tenet and McLaughlin] had been personally involved in the preparation of the report. ... It wasn't just that it was wrong. They lied. ... they should have been shot."

Too bad the outspoken Carl Ford made the incorrect assumption that he could rely on his credibility and entrance with Secretary Powell to thwart the likes of

Tenet and McLaughlin, as they peddled their meretricious wares at CIA headquarters.

Col. Wilkerson, whom Powell had put in charge of overseeing the UN speech, rued the fact that he did not insist that Ford take part on his team. "I wanted Carl or even more so, one of his deputies whom I knew well and trusted completely, Tom Fingar, to be on my team."

Key Intelligence Kept From Powell?

Some honest intelligence analysts surely would have been important if the goal was to make a truthful presentation to the United Nations. But it's clear from a historical perspective that honesty was not foremost on the Bush administration's agenda; it was trying to extract a Security Council resolution giving legal cover to the invasion.

For instance, we now know that, with the help of Allied intelligence services, the CIA had recruited Naji Sabri, Saddam Hussein's foreign minister, and Tahir Jalil Habbush, the chief of Iraqi intelligence. They were cajoled into remaining in place while giving the United States critical intelligence well before the war and before Powell's speech laying the groundwork for the war.

In other words, at a time when Saddam Hussein believed that Sabri and Habbush were working for him, they had been "turned" into U.S. agents, providing information that was evaluated and verified. The trouble was they weren't saying what Bush and his neocon advisers wanted to hear. The pair independently affirmed that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

So, what to do? Former CIA officials have said that this information on the absence of WMD was then concealed from Congress as well as from senior U.S. military officers and from intelligence analysts, including those working on the infamous Iraq-WMD National Intelligence Estimate of Oct. 1, 2002. Even Secretary of State Colin Powell, Naji Sabri's U.S. counterpart, was kept in the dark.

As Col. Wilkerson noted, Vice President Cheney was the real person in charge of foreign policy, intelligence and Iraq War. Knowledgeable officials at State, CIA and elsewhere were forced to look on as what we used to call "straphangers," when they were allowed in the room at all.

I vividly recall Wilkerson fielding a question from Rep. Walter Jones, R-North Carolina, at a congressional hearing on June 25, 2006.

Jones: "My point is as a congressman who trusted what I was being told. ... And I wish I'd the wisdom then that I might have now. I would have known what to ask. ... So where along the way how did these people so early on get so much power

that they had more influence ... in the administration to make decisions than you the professionals?"

Wilkerson: "I'd answer you with two words. Let me put the article in there and make it three. The Vice President."

So, even if Powell suspected he was being lied to by Tenet and McLaughlin, he would have been unlikely to call them out on it with the Vice President and his bloated staff standing foursquare behind the whole charade.

The UN speech was hardly Powell's first display of abject acquiescence. The Bush administration documents on the crafting of imprisonment and torture policy show Powell, though a military man knowing the risks to American soldiers from the U.S. government casting aside legal conventions against torture, unwilling to stand up for what he knew was right, i.e. not to torture or play word games about torture.

A year before his UN speech, rather than confront President Bush personally on White House pressure for legal wiggle-room for torture, Powell asked State Department lawyers to engage White House counsel Alberto Gonzales and Cheney's legal adviser David Addington in what Powell knew would be a quixotic effort, absent his personal involvement.

Powell's lawyers put in writing his concern that making an end-run around the Geneva protections for prisoners of war "could undermine U.S. military culture which emphasizes maintaining the highest standards of conduct in combat, and could introduce an element of uncertainty in the status of adversaries."

But when Gonzales and Addington simply declared parts of the Geneva Conventions "quaint" and "obsolete," Powell caved, acquiescing in the corruption of the Army to which he owed so much. We know the next chapters of that story. They are entitled CIA "black sites," Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

Powell was right in his position on torture but timid about risking his political status. He knew that Cheney would badmouth him to the President. Once again, Powell put his career before his principles and before what ultimately would be in the best interests of the United States of America.

Briefing the Bosses

I personally know Colin Powell and consider him more a tragic than a venal figure. When he wore only two stars, as military assistant to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger (1983-1986), I would brief Powell, as a courtesy, on my way in to what had to be a one-on-one briefing of his boss with the CIA's *President's Daily Brief* and other highly sensitive substantive material.

Not surprisingly, Powell was interested in learning what I was about to tell his boss. So, I would usually make it a point to arrive at the Pentagon five or ten minutes early in order to fill him in to the extent I could.

From that experience, as well as from briefings of Weinberger on his occasional visits to the West Coast, I came to consider Powell a very clever, reasonably smart, highly ambitious, and when he thought it was necessary highly obsequious functionary.

Suffice it to say that, despite his two stars (to my none), he was almost always polite, and extremely careful to abide by the rigid guidelines regarding one-on-one delivery of the *PDB*, for example. Only once did he try, unsuccessfully, to wrest the *PDB* from my hands so that he, not I, could take it into Weinberger's hotel room.

I interpreted Powell's subsequent deferential demeanor toward me as a sign of his acute awareness that my boss at the time, CIA Director William Casey, had the ear of President Ronald Reagan much more often than his boss, Weinberger.

I thought of this as I watched Powell's obvious attempts two decades later to become a full-fledged member in good standing of the George W. Bush team. Powell knew only too well that "slam dunk" Tenet, with Cheney's encouragement, was a high scorer. Clearly, Powell knew that Tenet and Cheney were working hand-in-glove on conjuring up "intelligence" to justify the attack on Iraq.

Colin Powell was hardly the only senior official thoroughly intimidated by the Vice President and his minions. Even so, could Powell have brought himself to believe that Tenet and McLaughlin would lie to his face in portraying Curveball's fairy tale as authentic and corroborated? I think that would have been difficult for Powell.

One of Rumsfeld's dicta (reflected in the Teflon he still wears) was: "Some people think they can lie and get away with it." This observation raises another key question: How did Cheney, Tenet and their co-conspirators think they could get away with it, when no WMD, much less Iraqi ties with al-Qaeda, were found?

They should be asked this under oath in a formal inquiry into the Iraq War, a process that the United States has not undertaken even though its ally, the United Kingdom, at least asked some official questions (though little more) into how the disaster unfolded. Presumably, if such an inquiry were ever held in the United States, the participants the links in the chain would simply point to the interlocking others on either side.

The thinking of Team Bush apparently assumed that after the successful removal of "ruthless dictator" Saddam Hussein, the thankful Iraqis would accept an

indefinite U.S. occupation, grant permanent military bases along with access to Iraqi oil, and embrace Israel. Amid such “success,” who would be petty enough to criticize the heroic “war president” and his brilliant neocon advisers over the little detail about the absence of WMD?

If the Iraq War had played out that way, Colin Powell also could have basked in the glow of victory. Who would have talked about a “blot” on his record?


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Recycling Radioactive Metals Disputed

An Energy Department plan to allow the recycling of scrap metals emitting very low levels of radiation is drawing opposition because of concerns about potential health hazards. But the upside for U.S. atomic bomb-makers is that waste now requiring costly storage could be sold for a profit, reports William Boardman.

By William Boardman

In something of a stealth maneuver during the 2012 holiday season, the U.S. Department of Energy set about to give every American a little more radiation exposure, and for some a lot, by allowing manufacturers to use radioactive metals in their consumer products such as zippers, spoons, jewelry, belt buckles, toys, pots, pans, furnishings, bicycles, jungle gyms, medical implants, or any other metal or partly-metal product.

The Energy Dept. announced its plan in the Federal Register on Dec. 12 and invited comment for 30 days, through Jan.11. Citing its need to address environmental concerns under the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), the agency said, in part, that its plan was: “to delegate authority to manage radiological clearance and release of scrap metal from radiological areas to each Under Secretary for sites under his or her cognizance. 

“ This Draft PEA for the Recycling of Scrap Metals Originating from Radiological Areas analyzes the potential environmental impacts associated with resuming the

clearance of scrap metal, originating from DOE radiological areas, for recycling pursuant to improved procedures designed to assure that clearance for release is limited to metals meeting stringent criteria.”

Translated from the bureaucratese, this is a proposal to lift a ban on recycling radioactive metals left over from American bomb-making and other nuclear activities and allow them to be used commercially with “stringent” but largely unenforceable criteria for their use. The initial ban was ordered in 2000, by then Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson.

Largely ignored by mainstream media, the plan caught the attention of an alert member of Congress, Rep. Edward Markey, D-Massachusetts, who wrote a three-page letter to Energy Secretary Steven Chu on Jan. 11, beginning:

“I write to convey my grave concerns regarding your December 2012 proposal to rescind the agency-wide suspension of the release of radioactively contaminated scrap metal from Department of Energy (DOE) facilities for purposes of recycling it into consumer products that could ultimately be utilized by pregnant women, children or other vulnerable populations. This proposal is unwise, and should be immediately abandoned.”

Although Rep. Markey was writing on the date of the original deadline, the Energy Department had invited the public to respond to an email address that was non-functional during the first nine days of the response period, Dec. 12-20. On Dec. 28, the department announced in the Federal Register that the comment period was extended to Feb. 11.

On Jan. 16, while taking note of Markey’s letter, the Wall Street Journal covered the story by starting this way: “The Department of Energy is proposing to allow the sale of tons of scrap metal from government nuclear sites, an attempt to reduce waste that critics say could lead to radiation-tainted belt buckles, surgical implants and other consumer products.

“The approximately 14,000 tons of metal under review for possible initial release is only a fraction of the tens of millions of tons of metal recycled annually, it said. Smaller amounts could be eligible for release in future years. Selling the metals could bring in \$10 million to \$40 million a year, the DOE estimates.”

Minimizing Radiation Dangers

As is common in nuclear industry proposals of all sorts, the Energy Department sought to assure readers of its proposal that any radiation exposure resulting from recycling radioactive waste into the commercial mainstream would have minimal impact on any given individual. The article in the *Journal* included a

chart from the department that reinforced its claim that “would at worst expose a person to very low levels of additional radiation.”

This approach ignores the current scientific consensus that there is NO safe level of radiation exposure. Since there is already a measurable level of background radiation worldwide, and since worldwide radiation levels have increased as a result of nuclear weapons testing and nuclear accidents like Chernobyl and Fukushima, the fundamental safety question is whether any additional radiation exposure is safe in any meaningful sense.

This approach also fails to deal with the reality that once the department has released radioactive materials for commercial use, it loses almost all control over how and where they’re used, and in what concentrations. The same material used in a ceiling light fixture will pose less risk than if it is used in a belt buckle of jewelry, worn close to the skin. These uses are less dangerous than material inside a human body, in a joint replacement or heart valve.

The issue is of global concern because other countries are recycling their radioactive waste as well, with uncertain control and safety. As Rep. Markey noted in his letter, “Just a year ago, Bed Bath and Beyond recalled tissue holders made in India that were contaminated with low levels of the radioisotope cobalt-60 that were shipped to 200 of its stores in twenty states.

“The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, when discussing the discovery of the contaminated products, said that, ‘There’s no real health threat from these, but we advise people to return them.’ “

While that may seem contradictory, it’s mainly because the choice of the word “real” is not very accurate. It’s true that there’s no threat of immediate injury from a low level of radiation, whereas a high enough level will be lethal. It’s also true that there may be no “realistic” threat from a radioactive tissue box, but that’s not the same as “no threat,” since harm from radiation exposure is cumulative.

Rep. Markey’s letter illustrates this concern, as he notes that the Energy Department is proposing to release contaminated metals into the market place, as long as, quoting from the document, it “can be shown that the release will result in less than 1 millirem (mrem) above background to a member of the public in any calendar year.” [One millirem is a tiny amount of radiation.]

Nevertheless, Markey expresses doubt about even this low standard: “I believe this standard, *even it were the appropriate standard*, will be impossible to assure or enforce.” [Emphasis added]

No One in Charge of Risk

There is no federal agency with responsibility for such oversight or enforcement. This regulatory vacuum was illuminated by the discovery in 2009 of thousands of contaminated consumer products from China, Brazil, France, Sweden and other countries, as reported by *Mother Nature Network*:

“The risk of radiation poisoning is the furthest thing from our minds as we shop for everyday items like handbags, furniture, buttons, chain link fences and cheese graters. Unfortunately, it turns out that our trust is misplaced thanks to sketchy government oversight of recycled materials.

“The discovery of a radioactive cheese grater led to an investigation that found thousands of additional consumer products to be contaminated. The source is recycled metals tainted with Cobalt-60, a radioactive isotope that can cause cancer with prolonged exposure.”

According to a Scripps Howard News Service investigation in 2009, records of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission “ show 18,740 documented cases involving radioactive materials in consumer products, in metal intended for consumer products or other public exposure to radioactive material.

“The U.S. Government Accountability Office estimates there are some 500,000 unaccounted for radioactively contaminated metal objects in the U.S., and the NRC estimates that figure is around is 20 million pounds of contaminated waste.

“In 2006 in Texas, for example, a recycling facility inadvertently created 500,000 pounds of radioactive steel byproducts after melting metal contaminated with Cesium-137, according to U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission records. In Florida in 2001, another recycler unintentionally did the same, and wound up with 1.4 million pounds of radioactive material.”

Nuclear engineer Arnie Gunderson echoed Markey’s warning in his Jan. 13 podcast, pointing out that the nuclear industry has been trying to do something like this for decades. The reason, he explained, was that radioactive materials are now liabilities for those who own them and are responsible for protecting them and eventually storing them safely. But if they can sell the material, the liability instantly becomes an asset.

NIRS, the Nuclear Information and Resource Service, has come out strongly against the Energy Department initiative, noting the long history of the industry to unburden itself of its radioactive waste and any responsibility for it:

“We’ve fought this battle before. In the late 1980s, NRC adopted a policy it

called 'Below Regulatory Concern (BRC),' that would have allowed about 30% of the nation's 'low-level' radioactive waste to be treated as normal garbage and dumped in landfills, be burned in incinerators, and yes, be recycled into consumer products.

"NIRS and our allies responded with one of our largest organizing campaigns ever. 15 states passed laws banning BRC within their borders. Hearings were held in the House and in 1992, Congress officially overturned the BRC policy."

The grassroots action contributed to Secretary Richardson's ban on selling radioactive metals for commercial use, the ban that the current Energy Department proposal would overturn. The department has offered no new basis for its recycling program beyond streamlining what it proposed before. NIRS counters that:

"Nothing has changed since 2000 that would justify lifting its current ban. Rather, just the opposite: since then the National Academy of Sciences has acknowledged that there is no safe level of radiation exposure, and we've learned that women are even more vulnerable to radiation than men (while children have long been known to be more vulnerable than adults)."

NIRS and other advocacy organizations are currently engaged in a campaign to submit comments before the Feb. 11 deadline to ask the Energy Department to withdraw this proposal.

William Boardman runs Panther Productions. Reader Supported News is the publication of origin for this work.
