

Fiddling While the World Burns

In the mid-to-late 1970s, the U.S. began grappling with the energy crisis as Jimmy Carter pushed investments in alternative energies and called for conservation, but then Ronald Reagan arrived on the scene. Now, the world faces a much greater crisis, says David William Pear.

By David William Pear

The United States has no limit on the amount of money, treasure, lives and inalienable rights it is willing to sacrifice against terrorism. It justifies it by saying that it is necessary to keep the American people safe. There is little proof that it does.

An American today, and into the far future, is much more likely to suffer from human-caused climate change than any terrorist attack. Even the military knows that climate change is a bigger threat than ISIS. But the response is to put off corrective action to far into the future, minimize a response, debate the seriousness, deny its cause and fiddle while the Earth literally burns.

The U.S.A. has done little but wring its hands about the problems with fossil fuel, even before climate change became a known major threat. For half a century the response to the need for alternative energy has been to procrastinate. President after president have come and gone.

On April 18, 1977, President Jimmy Carter made a formal address to the nation on energy. [Watch it here.] Carter warned of a world that he said was simply running out of oil. The growing demand was more than new supplies from discoveries, he said, adding that imported oil, especially from the Middle East, had proved to be too unreliable.

Earlier, during Richard Nixon's presidency, the Arab countries had led an oil embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) against the U.S., which had angered the Arab member countries by backing Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Oil prices skyrocket 400 percent because of the oil embargo, with oil jumping from \$3 per barrel to \$12 per barrel. Shortages of gasoline caused rationing and long lines at the gas pumps. The sudden jump in oil prices led to hyperinflation. The public was outraged and frightened.

In his speech less than three months into his presidency Carter warned that if the government did not take the responsibility for a national energy policy, then the American people would face a decline in their standard of living. He

said future generations would suffer.

Carter and the country faced another "oil shock" in 1978-1979 after the Iran Revolution took much of Iran's oil out of production at a time of high world demand for oil. The price of oil rose to \$40 per barrel.

Fear-mongers predicted that gas-guzzling automobiles would be ditched by the side of the road as useless. Gun battles broke out between motorists in hours-long gas lines. Gasoline purchases were rationed. People turned to more fuel-efficient imported automobiles.

Carter had hoped to rally the American people to meet the energy crisis. Instead, as the New York Times said, Carter's speech had "depressed and irritated" them. Yet, today Carter is well remembered for his promotion of solar energy. Carter championed solar power and installed 32 solar panels on the roof of the White House.

In 1980, the American people said they had enough of Carter and his gloom and doom. They traded Carter the peanut farmer for Ronald Reagan, the old pitchman for General Electric Corporation. Reagan cheerfully told the American people what they wanted to hear. Reagan's energy policy was that he did not have one. His Secretary of Energy James B. Edwards said his goal was to abolish the Department of Energy.

In the 1980s, the oil shortage turned into an oil glut, though warnings continued that there would be future oil shortages, that peak oil had been reached, and that the world would run out of oil. The public was not listening. They lost interest in energy conservation and alternative non-carbon energy sources.

Reagan added insult to Carter's injury by removing the solar panels from the roof of the White House. He left the lights burning in the White House as a sign of what he thought about energy conservation.

Today with the focus on climate change, President Barack Obama understands the power, both literally and figuratively, of solar energy. As a candidate for president, he said to cheering crowds that alternative energy would be high on his list of priorities. The issue helped him win the White House.

As president, Obama has repeatedly said: "We know the country that harnesses the power of clean, renewable energy will lead the 21st century." [Watch here.] So far, however, the U.S. is not leading. Obama has been no "Jimmy Carter" when it comes to promoting alternative energy. He has continued "failed U.S. energy policies." but he deserves some credit for some promises he has kept.

One of Obama's success stories is that he installed American-made solar panels on the White House roof. The White House now uses solar power in its kitchen. [\[Watch here.\]](#)

The White House solar panels are an important symbol of the reality of climate change, that solar power works, the urgency that is needed, and our latent ability to find technological and policy solutions. Solar electricity is one of them.

There are many amazing things about solar energy. Solar panels will last for [decades](#) with little [maintenance](#), while providing energy with very [low emissions](#). Solar panels have no moving parts to make [noise](#). They produce electricity directly from [the Sun](#). Solar panels can avoid the need and cost of [transmission lines](#).

The Sun is our most abundant source of energy. The energy from the Sun can be directly harvested from the Sun's light ([photovoltaic](#)) and its heat ([solar thermal](#)). Solar photovoltaic panel systems use solar cells to convert light directly into electricity. To explain how it works would take an "Einstein." In fact, that is what Albert Einstein won the [Nobel Prize](#) for in 1921.

Solar panels are typically used for residential systems, but they can be used on large commercial projects. They can be mounted almost anywhere and are easily adaptable to remote and inaccessible location. They do not require an infrastructure of grids. Plus, they reduce climate change.

Climate change is not just something to worry about 50 years from now. We cannot keep sticking our heads in the sand by setting [far-off goals](#) into the future. The warming of the earth is expected to cause continued increases in [catastrophic weather](#): hurricanes, cyclones, flooding, drought, forest fires, tornados and even [earthquakes](#).

Worldwide climate catastrophes are more frequent and rising. For example, Hurricane Katrina was more devastating [because](#) of global warming. It caused damages of \$80 billion and 200 people died. The number of people who suffered was at least one-half million.

Nuclear power is not the answer to alternative clean energy, more a catastrophic accident waiting to happen. Climate change has [increased](#) the risks of nuclear energy. Nuclear power reactors need to be located near large bodies of water. Water is used for cooling power plants and the storage of their radioactive waste. Water is a main culprit in nuclear disasters and contamination.

Every U.S. nuclear reactor has an unsolvable problem with [nuclear waste](#). There is no place to put it, nobody will take it, and it remains deadly for thousands

of years.

Since the beginning of the U.S. nuclear age 70 years ago, nuclear waste has been kept in temporary storage at 61 nuclear plants. The “temporary storage” was designed to hold the waste for only 10 years. Under the Price-Anderson Nuclear Industry Indemnity Act, a nuclear power plant is not responsible for over \$12.6 billion in liability. The rest with an estimated cost of \$720 billion for each disaster is the responsibility of society.

The nuclear power industry could not exist without Price-Anderson’s socialized cost and it is a huge social cost. Yet the nuclear industry is one of the loudest screamers about subsidies to solar energy.

When things go wrong at a nuclear power plant, they go very wrong. Tokyo Electric Power Company’s (TEPCO) Fukushima power plant is a tragic example of how wrong things can go. Japan has socialized the expense of dealing with it.

Three of Fukushima’s nuclear reactors had a catastrophic core meltdown after they were hit by a tsunami from the Pacific Ocean on March 11, 2011. Global warming may have been a factor in the intensity of the quake-caused tsunami.

The storm surge knocked out Fukushima’s emergency electric generators that keep the cooling water circulating in an emergency. As a result the nuclear rods overheated and caused a meltdown of the nuclear reactors. The flood waters then became contaminated with radiation.

There was nowhere for the contaminated water to go except into the atmosphere, the ground and the Pacific Ocean. For four years, an estimated 71,895 gallons of “low level” radioactive water has been dumped every day into the Pacific Ocean.

Worse news is that Fukushima has another 14.4 million gallons of “highly contaminated” water it has been storing in seven underground storage facilities. That water is leaking into the Pacific Ocean, too. Another 95,860 gallons of ground water is leaking into the basement of the damaged reactors every day. It has nowhere to go except into the Pacific Ocean, the ground and the atmosphere.

TEPCO says it has a three-year plan to build storage tanks, but the water from the mountains above are flowing in at the rate of 35.9 million additional gallons a year. It is out of control and poisoning the planet.

A lot is unknown to the public about the Fukushima disaster. TEPCO, the Japanese government, international agencies, foreign governments and the nuclear industry have been accused of deception and a cover up.

The public is being told that Fukushima is estimated to cost \$105 billion in cleanup and liabilities. As the cleanup is going slow, to say the least, it will be seen how much the final costs and health consequences are, if we ever find out.

Japan has been one of the leaders in solar energy. One would think that with the nuclear catastrophe Japan would have a crash-program for more solar energy. Amazingly, one would be wrong. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe wants to cut back on solar. The electric utility industry says Japan has been overwhelmed with electricity from small entrepreneur solar energy producers.

In two years, new solar installations are providing 3.4 gigawatts of power to Japan. That is equal to three brand new nuclear power plants. Abe and the electric utilities say that is too much. They want to stop it and import more cheap fossil fuel, and add more nuclear power.

Neoliberals such as Abe hate the idea of electric utilities having to buy solar energy from small producers. He would rather pay subsidies to monopolies such as Big Oil, Big Nuclear and Big Electric. Abe's complaints about solar energy are typical of the opposition. They say solar is too expensive, undependable, and disruptive to the grid.

Firstly, solar power works. It is a proven scientific fact. Light shines on a solar cell and voila, electricity comes out. Solar energy has largely been a worldwide cottage industry, pushed by grassroots activists to change the laws to require the local electric utility company to allow individuals to install solar panels that feed into the local electric utility's grid.

There is nothing new about cottage industry electric generators. That is how the industry got its start, until holding companies started buying them up in the early Twentieth Century to form monopolies that could manipulate prices for maximum profits.

When Big Electric talks about solar being disruptive to the grid they are usually talking about "disrupting" their monopoly. Monopolies do not like competition.

Unpleasantly for Big Electricity, it was discovered that the design of their meters allowed the little disc (the widget that measures how much electricity a customer is using) to run backwards as well as forward. That means whenever a customer produces unused solar electricity, the meter will run backwards reducing the customer's electric bill. It has the same result as selling electricity to the electric utility at retail prices.

Big Electric does not like paying retail. It complains that solar does not work

when the Sun is not shining. After all, Big Electric says, a big electric company has to know how much electricity it has and how much it needs to produce.

One rebuttal is that solar produces more electricity just in time on hot sunny days when all the air conditioners are cranked up. Solar electricity can also boost the electricity to the grid on extremely hot days, greatly extending the life of very expensive transformers.

The cost of solar has been the main issue. Using generally accepted accounting practices (GAAP) solar looks very expensive. No business-minded person is going to invest in solar energy unless they get a subsidy from somebody, either from Big Electric or from the government. And that brings up a glaring problem with GAAP.

GAAP does not take into consideration the potential for future economies of scale and future advances in technology. Prices of solar panels and their efficiency have already improved considerably with the grassroots efforts made all over the world in the last few decades.

GAAP does not calculate the full social costs or the big subsidies to fossil fuels and big subsidies to the nuclear industry. It does not measure the costs of wars about oil, neocolonialism and quest for world domination for natural resources. It does not measure the lives and property that will be ruined and lost by war and climate change. GAAP does not calculate the technology that has not yet been invented. The U.S. used to have enough faith in itself that it could conquer such problems.

Jimmy Carter said that a real energy policy would require the "moral equivalent of war." Obama said that whoever leads in alternative energy would lead in the Twenty-first Century. Unlike other wars, this one could bring more peace and prosperity to the Twenty-first Century.

The market economy and free enterprise are a powerful and wonderful thing. The government can put in the seed money to greatly stimulate innovation and technology, and the power of the market can propel solar electricity to its full potential.

With help from their government and policies that welcome solar electricity, cloudy Germany now produces 30 percent of its electricity from renewable energy. The Chernobyl nuclear accident was the wakeup call. Unlike Japan, Germany decided to completely phase out its nuclear power plants by 2022.

For the cost of the Iraq War for just one year, the U.S. could have built solar power plants to light up every home in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago combined. Just think of all the valued jobs it would have created in the U.S.A. Solar panels could have been put on every home in America for the cost of the Iraq War, with hundreds of billions of dollars left over. The savings in property and lives is incalculable.

The holdup in solar electricity is not the cost, it is not the technology, and it is not because the public does not want it. It is because of a lack of imagination and the political will to do it.

After 40 years, David William Pear retired from investment management and started writing on economic, political and social subjects. He is a regular columnist for The Real News Network and Op Ed News.
