

THE ENVIRONMENT



Sammy Linebaugh

IN THE BLEAK HOURS AFTER Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt marked the United States' entrance into World War II proclaiming, "I believe I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make very certain that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again." Fifty-five years and a Cold War later, experts warn of a 21st-century brand of treachery now lurking—a nuclear Pearl Harbor at the hands of terrorists.

A Private-Sector Proposal...

Some question the will of today's Congress to fulfil Roosevelt's prophecy, among them retired Navy admiral Daniel Murphy, former chief of staff for Vice-President Bush and chairman of the disarmament company, US Fuel and Security Inc. (USFSI). Since 1993, USFSI has spent US\$ 4 million developing a private-sector plan to reduce the risk of nuclear capability falling into the wrong hands by building a common storage site for much of the world's spent nuclear fuel. The anti-proliferation entrepreneurs have set sights for the project on Wake Island, a Pacific atoll which ironically was also a December 1941 battleground. But as USFSI seeks the government go-ahead on the potentially lucrative undertaking, the proposed location is proving an all-too-familiar stumbling block. Environmentalists are wincing at the international storage concept altogether, while the region's congressional leaders insist "not in our backyard".

Once the site of a Japanese prison where approximately 100 Americans died, the atoll, controlled by the US Air Force, lies 2,500 miles from Honolulu and 500 miles from the nearest inhabited island. The company's US\$ 7 billion

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Can the Private Sector Deal with Nuclear Stockpiles?

solution is to construct a containment facility atop a man-made island within Wake Island's four-square-mile lagoon. German-designed steel castors with walls four times as thick as a nuclear submarine would fill the one-square-mile warehouse, each with a carrying capacity of several metric tons.

As proposed, the investor-funded operation would be of no cost to the US government or its taxpayers as it would contract its transport and storage services to utility companies throughout Europe and Asia. Planning to charge roughly US\$ 1 million per metric ton, less than half the going rate of reprocessing spent nuclear fuel, the concept already has amassed significant support among foreign utilities, according to USFSI director Alex Copson. "We can't keep Germany or France from reprocessing, but we can steal their customers." Many would quit reprocessing tomorrow, he says, given a cheaper and safer alternative.

...to Meet a Public Need

Global stockpiles of spent fuel are now at approximately 130,000 metric tons. By century's end, the amount is expected to be 200,000 metric tons. The US banned the chemical reprocessing of spent fuel, a massive proliferation headache since plutonium (a weapons-usable amount the size of a baseball could level the entire downtown of Oklahoma City) is a by-product. Foreign utilities have yet to follow with similar prohibitions due largely to the absence of their own feasible and cost-effective storage solutions. With no signs for change, the resulting plutonium log jam now at approximately 6,000 metric tons (enough for 260,000 warheads) is getting worse, not better.

"The need for a permanent site for the storage of spent nuclear fuel is universal in terms of domestic and international environmental and security issues, and delays in the establishment of such a site have been unsettling", reads a USFSI release. Of particular concern is the security of nuclear stockpiles scattered throughout the countries of the former Soviet Union. According to Harvard Science and

International Affairs director, Graham Allison, there have so far been at least six attempts to steal either plutonium or the equally deadly highly-enriched uranium. "We are at a critical juncture ... if we let one horse out of the barn vs. 1,000, that is a big difference."

Allison warns that unless an aggressive and expedited containment strategy is implemented, leakage to terrorists and an impending nuclear attack is not only possible, but probable. This past March, the Harvard professor addressed a gathering of 200 among the anti-proliferation community who assembled at Georgetown University to advance their concerns over the potential spread of nuclear violence. "The theft and sale of nuclear weapons and fissile materials to terrorist or rogue states ... is the biggest external threat to Americans' lives and liberties."

Many conference-goers joined Allison in criticising a US "nibbling strategy" whereby less than 0.2% of the \$260 billion defence budget is dedicated to containing post-Soviet "loose-nukes". USFSI executives were among the bureaucratic remedy roasters, ready in turn to pitch the Wake Island plan. Copson explained, "[The storage facility] must be in US territory and subject to US environmental standards to be financable. It must be somewhere stable. We've done the research, the Pacific is the place."

Political heavyweights backing the USFSI proposal include former Secretary of State James Baker, former CIA director William Webster, former Marine Corps Commissioner Paul Kelley, and former Customs Commissioner William Van Raab. Believing national security interests justify consideration of the island as a storage spot, Van Raab described the commercial approach as "... bold, forward-thinking and creative", while emphasising that in building the proposed facility, USFSI would actually clean up some of the atoll's existing pollution.

Some Predictable Obstacles...

Polluted or not, federal law currently prohibits the transport or storage of

nuclear waste on any US territory or possession unless specifically authorised by an Act of Congress. USFSI has yet to receive such approval, having drafted a bill that remains in search of a congressional sponsor. Meanwhile, members of Congress representing the Pacific region are screaming bloody murder at the prospect, and last March passed a continuing resolution reaffirming the law with respect to Wake Island.

In a letter to President Clinton from the Pacific Coalition headed by Democratic Senator Akaka (Hawaii), many of the region's delegates condemned the use of any Pacific territory as a storage site for nuclear waste. Not only did they raise environmental questions, including "... the wisdom of siting such a facility on an isolated atoll that is prone to erosion and extreme weather conditions", but contended, "this proposal would increase the risk of nuclear proliferation by placing the critical elements of weapons of mass destruction—plutonium and highly enriched uranium—in private hands." The White House responded to the letter with assurances that although the idea "has much merit", the administration will not support any proposition that would make US territory "...the dump site for much of the world's spent fuel".

Damon Moglen of Greenpeace shares the same sentiment. "What it amounts to is another third-world dump site for another first-world problem. Whether nuclear or toxic waste, the country of generation ought to be the country of elimination. That's the cost of dirty business." Moglen also raises concerns about the effect of global warming on sea rise and the resulting potential for submersion of the atoll. While defending the stability of Wake's horseshoe-shaped cluster of islands, Murphy explains that the containers are designed for mobility and durability, adding "the technology to be used in terms of both the monolithic storage and transport containers is already proven and has been licensed for use in the US by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for almost 20 years."

...and a Surprising Supporter

While the project continues to win both friend and foe among US players, the USFSI trump card may just be the ear of the Russians. Russia's Atomic Affairs Minister, Victor Mikalov, has sent a letter to the Senate Committee on Energy and National Resources asking lawmakers to "... seriously consider this proposal." More important, Murphy has exacted a commitment from Mikalov that no US government official has been able to secure. The head of the Atomic Affairs Ministry (MinAtom) has given his word that so long as the USFSI proposal moves forward, he will not negotiate with rogue nations flashing handsome sums in exchange for a picking over of Russian nuclear stockpiles. While recognising the proliferation dangers of striking any such deals, financial woes in the revolution-convinced country until now have kept Mikalov from making any promises.

Why change his tune at USFSI's behest? Because USFSI is offering the Russians a 50% interest in the project which, if approved, could mean billions for the bankrupt atomic ministry. In a nation blighted by a Cold War hangover, the Russians, not surprisingly, are smitten by the proposed joint-venture's future and immediate remedies.

For the long term, USFSI has hinted at expanding into a "cradle to grave" operation that would bring uranium into the loop by leasing Russian quantities to utilities as reactor fuel, then collecting, transporting and storing the fuel after it is used. Such expansion would generate even greater revenues while moving one step closer to jointly controlling the nuclear cycle. In the meantime, Mikalov has agreed to consider storing much of the country's current plutonium stock along with the spent fuel—that is if the US agrees to sequester equal amounts.

As for the short term, says Copson, MinAtom's half-interest in the deal would help stabilise the ministry by creating equity in the venture to borrow against and thereby start sustaining employee salaries. Until MinAtom finds a way to fund paycheques and pensions, experts warn that weapons-

usable plutonium and uranium—not to mention nuclear intelligence—are in danger of becoming the hottest commodity on the international black market and the calling card of Russia's new Mafia.

A Russian Worker's Mealticket?

Nuclear facility security remains "unsatisfactory" at best, sources say. Meanwhile, employees from janitors to scientists are braving months in between paycheques and are on the hunt for alternative sources of income. "We need to address the people problem, so that scientists aren't tempted to take their knowledge elsewhere, like Iran, just to keep their families from starving", acknowledges Jack Caravalli, National Security Council Director for Nuclear Materials.

Russia's missile sale to Iran in April only heightens fears of a nuclear swap, under or over the table. Yet the greatest emotional appeal for consideration of the USFSI plan probably comes from those Americans who know Wake Island best. Encouraged by a promise of a US\$ 100,000 education trust fund for their descendants, a coalition of survivors of the Japanese imprisonment have been among the strongest USFSI advocates. "Wake Island Atoll is hallowed ground for us and a whole generation of Americans ... We feel [the USFSI proposal] could be a lasting memorial to those who fought for freedom in the Pacific or died or were executed in prison camps ... For us, the survivors of the defence of Wake Island, using the Atoll for this purpose is fitting for this important historic legacy..."

Whether the administration or Congress will give the plan a serious look remains to be seen. Short of finding a congressional sponsor, Copson says that USFSI's next move is a formal presentation to administration officials in the spring of 1998. In the meantime, as issues like NATO expansion continue to play on the fragile chemistry between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin, some speculate that the concept of a USFSI-MinAtom marriage bound by their mutual security and financial interests is likely to enjoy increased popularity. Whatever the solution—public, private or both—Copson warns that to continue the present course "is like playing the fiddle while Rome burns". ♦

The anti-proliferation entrepreneurs have set their sights on Wake Island, another December 1941 battleground.