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The Political Struggle Surrounding Nuclear Power

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The Political Struggle Surrounding Nuclear Power

The potential for nuclear power was first discovered around the 1930s. Nuclear fission was found to release a great deal of energy, which would later be harnessed in the forms of nuclear weapons and electricity production. The first nuclear submarine was built in Groton, Connecticut and completed in 1955, almost a decade after the testing of the world's first nuclear weapon. Nuclear power thereafter cemented itself within the United States. Today all United States submarines are run by nuclear reactors. Nuclear power plants are seen as an effective alternative to fossil fuels as they are more reliable than other alternative energies and cheaper to keep running. Countries like France and Sweden have already taken the leap to decarbonize by primarily using nuclear power. More often countries remain like the United States, weary of the implementation of an energy source that has the potential to bring catastrophic damage. They have not forgotten the accidents at Fukushima or Chernobyl. While governments may be more forgiving as they see the economic benefits that come with the risk, the opinion of the public is one that is harder to sway. Nuclear power has not been implemented to a greater degree in the United States because communities cannot agree with governments to create policy that they believe truly protects them and the environment, mainly in terms of the storage of nuclear waste. The cost to construct a nuclear power plant and find a place to store radioactive waste is a steep one, and it becomes even more so when safety regulations need to be executed. It is no surprise that big business would want to take short cuts that cuts corners on safety. But when small mistakes can mean big disasters safety is not something the public wants to compromise on.

Throughout the decades the public has become more environmentally conscious. They better understand how industry can ruin ecosystems and how they themselves can become

afflicted. While the potential for a nuclear meltdown is frightening, there is a more pressing threat faced from nuclear power that the United States government has been struggling to handle since the introduction of nuclear power. All nuclear reactors, whether they be in the form of plants or submarines, produce nuclear waste. This waste is radioactive and takes decades to decay. While we are running these plants and submarines we are generating waste that has nowhere to go. Today much of it is kept at the reactor site, but this is not a long term solution if the plant continues to generate more. When nuclear submarines get decommissioned the reactors that powered them need someplace to go. Yucca Mountain in Nevada was a proposed repository site to store the country's waste. But political opposition has kept it from being funded. Since its proposal different presidential administrations have tried to either get it up and running or shut it down. While this indecision ensues plants and submarines are generating more waste that ends up in people's backyards. That is one reason why the Yucca Mountain project was proposed; no one wants to live near a nuclear waste site. They often consist of metal drums containing the waste that are stored under the ground. While most storage containers are good at safely containing the material there is always the threat of leakage. Especially for the tanks that have been sitting for generations, as that's how long it will take for the waste to decay. With leakage comes groundwater contamination which would then spill into waterways, harming marine and terrestrial organisms alike. People living near these waterways would experience adverse health effects. The public does not wish to risk such events, while those in the government who would remain untouched don't have as much concern. To them it is less pressing of an issue, as seen by the years it has taken for a decision to be made concerning Yucca Mountain. Just as with the looming threat of climate change, those in power will wait to take action until they themselves

are staring it in the face and have no option but to address it. They would rather reap the benefits of nuclear power without concerning themselves with what to do with the nuclear waste until it is spilling in the streets and they truly cannot escape it.

The nation should continue to use nuclear power as an alternative energy to fossil fuels. It is a reliable and low greenhouse gas emitting source of electricity that would allow us to take a step back from fossil fuels. But we cannot keep sidelining the issue of what to do with the nuclear waste it produces. It is a mountain we must conquer before we can try move forward and fully embrace nuclear power.