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Scuttlebiz: What's so funny about abolishing the DOE?

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Many people chuckled when President Trump picked former Texas Gov. Rick Perry to head the Department of Energy. That's because Perry said during the 2012 Republican presidential debates that the department was one of three that should be abolished.

Progressives, of course, cackled the loudest because they view the state as an omniscient force obligated to meet every human need. Every government agency is a special little snowflake, while conservatives like Perry are callous, knuckle-dragging troglodytes.

But even if Mr. Perry is heartless and dumb as a box of rocks (which I don't believe he is), what do you say we put the name-calling on hold for a moment and actually explore the merits of his past statement?

"Open-minded" and left-leaning Americans who reportedly like to "question authority" should try this one on for size: Why *shouldn't* the Energy Department be abolished?

If there's a pause, it's likely because the knee-jerk defenders and most talking heads don't have a clue about what the department actually does.

Based on the spittle I've seen, I can only assume the masses believe their smartphones and Netflix streams would go dark if the department ceased to exist.

The reality is that the biggest portion of DOE's \$27 billion 2016 budget – \$11 billion – actually went toward researching and developing nuclear weapons.

Call me a troglodyte (I only have a bachelor's degree) but weaponry development and security sounds to me like something that should fall into the Department of Defense realm. But hey, why do that when you can create an entirely new, semi-autonomous agency within the DOE called the National Nuclear Security Administration? Which is exactly what Washington did in 2000. The NNSA is now up to 2,400 employees and counting.

DOE's next biggest expense – about \$6 billion – went to cleaning up waste at nuclear weapon production facilities such as the Savannah River Site. That almost sounds like a job for the Environmental Protection Agency, if it could take a break from stamping out American industry with overzealous regulations.

Most of the rest of DOE's non-defense expenses are essentially corporate-welfare in the form of \$4 billion in subsidies and loan guarantees for renewable and conventional energy industries. Those scandal-in-waiting administrative tasks are best handled by, um, uh ... nobody?

Aside from being a GS-12's dream job, the DOE has been a crony-capitalist political tool for both parties since it was created by President Carter in 1977 (how *did* we manage to eek by without it?).

Now, I realize that advocating to blow up (figuratively, I repeat, figuratively) the DOE is heresy in these parts because SRS and its contractors sign roughly 10,000 paychecks in the region.

But I'm not saying these missions should go away – any regular reader of this column knows I want to see the Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility finished – I'm simply suggesting that, just maybe, it might make more sense to let somebody else do it.

Face it, MOX isn't the only over-budget, over-deadline project in the DOE drawer. There's Yucca Mountain in Nevada, the Clinch River Breeder Reactor in Tennessee, the Superconducting Super Collider in Texas and the Ultra Megatronic Accelerator in Delaware.

I made up that last one, but you get the picture.

The Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute estimates that abolishing the DOE and reassigning its functions to other agencies would save at least \$7 billion a year. That's \$7 billion that could be spent elsewhere (a wall?) or, better yet, kept in your pocket so you can pursue life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as you see fit.

Now back to Perry for a moment.

Trump was elected because Americans are tired of Washington's status quo, but Perry came across more like a beltway bureaucrat than a Texas maverick during his Senate confirmation hearings several weeks ago.

“My past statements made over five years ago about abolishing the Department of Energy do not reflect my current thinking,” he said. “I regret recommending its elimination. If confirmed, I will enter this role excited and passionate about advocating and advancing the core missions of the DOE.”

So if Perry is to be criticized for anything, it should be for having a less-than-rigid backbone.

WHEN HE DOES COME: What would *you* want to say to Perry when he comes to visit SRS?

I asked that very question of a local contractor I've known for years who has periodically done work at SRS in various capacities.

The first thing my fabricator friend would ask is if the department is really serious about completing the MOX facility. Current funding levels, a holdover from the Obama administration, are just enough to keep people employed but not enough to actually finish the job, which has been contracted to CB&I AREVA MOX Services LLC.

Millions of dollars in pipes, steel and components are sitting in laydown yards gathering dust and rust.

“People are just getting up every morning, getting their cup of coffee and saying, ‘If I get something done today, fine. If I don’t, nobody is going to say anything,’” he said.

He said the difference between monumental projects of the past, such as the Brooklyn Bridge or the Hoover Dam, is that one or two people gave the marching orders and everyone was held accountable. If Perry wants to find out what’s going on at SRS, my contractor source said, he needs to talk to frontline employees – alone.

“On the tours, all the barricades are up and they show you only what they want you to see,” he said. “(Perry) needs to ask to have a meeting with the janitor – and tell everyone else he wants them to leave the room so he can get the straight story.”

Something else the new administration should examine is the site’s “project labor agreement,” which not only stipulates contractors pay union-scale wages (through the horribly outdated Davis-Bacon Act) but hire union members almost *exclusively*. That locks out other skilled tradespeople and forces contractors to constantly poach workers from each other.

“With that agreement in place, I have no way of motivating workers to pick up the pace,” he said.

My source believes that if the site – and the regional businesses and contractors that live off its largess – could operate less wastefully, the federal installation would have a better shot at securing new missions. Aside from the ongoing cleanup efforts and tritium production, the only new missions in recent decades at the site are MOX and the Salt Waste Processing Facility.

“It would be nice to start getting more pluses on the table than minuses,” he said. “Out of every 10 stories that come out, nine are negative.”

HERE’S SOME POSITIVE ENERGY NEWS: A European-based renewable energy company this past week said it plans to turn 88 acres off Atomic Road in Beech Island, S.C., into a solar power farm.

ESA Renewables, a Castellon, Spain-based alternative energy provider with offices in Florida, is investing \$11 million in the “utility-scale solar farm” in Aiken County, according to an announcement by the South Carolina Department of Commerce.

The project will generate approximately 23,100 megawatt hours per year. That, by the way, is what just one of Southern Co.’s two operating units at Plant Vogtle can generate in a single day (even if it’s cloudy).

The state agency said the 500-panel field is capable of powering almost 2,400 single-family residences per year. Construction on the project is expected to begin in the first quarter of 2018 and finish by the fall.

TRAVEL-OUR-CITY: I've never used Uber, the ride-sharing service where I can pay strangers to give me a lift in their cars because I find it vaguely creepy. Yet I have absolutely no problem using Airbnb, the home-sharing service where I pay strangers to sleep in their beds. Call me kooky.

About 3,000 people last year used Airbnb to arrange for accommodations in the Augusta area, the company said, generating about \$817,000 in revenue for the homeowners. The San Francisco-based company reported a total of 321,000 people using the web-based platform to spend \$50.3 million in the Peach State last year, with the bulk of it – \$23.8 million – in the Atlanta metro area.

Tourism mecca Savannah was second on the list with \$8.2 million and Athens was No. 3 with \$1.6 million. Augusta ranked 10th, behind St. Simons Island but ahead of Dahlonega.

The total number of Georgians listing their homes through Airbnb was 6,800, a 94 percent increase from the previous year. The typical homeowner's per-year earnings are \$4,300, with 30 percent of hosts age 50 and older.

START ME UP: Airbnb was founded 10 years ago by two then-25-year-olds. You'll probably see a little of their entrepreneurial spirit in the documentary film *Generation Startup*, which will be screened at Augusta University on March 15 as part of a partnership between AU's Hull College of Business and the Augusta Metro Chamber of Commerce.

The film that takes you "to the front lines of entrepreneurship in America" portrays six recent college graduates risking it all to start businesses in Detroit. Shot over 17 months, the film was directed by Academy Award winner Cynthia Wade and Cheryl Miller Houser.

Hull College Dean Rick Franza said the school was pleased to work with the chamber in generating economic growth through entrepreneurship, particularly as it becomes a destination for cyber technology innovation.

The college, he said, "is proud to promote the entrepreneurial spirit in Augusta with both established and burgeoning industries."

Wanna go? Plan to be in University Hall, Room 170, at the Summerville Campus at 5 p.m. It's free and open to the public. Just register at AugustaMetroChamber.com beforehand to ensure you'll have a seat.