

Our Weird Energy Politics

The energy fecklessness of two Democratic administrations

By: Patrick J. Michaels

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What is it about the weather that compels our government to ineptly dictate how we produce electricity and consume energy? This a worthwhile question to ask on August 4, the anniversary of the day in 1977 that President James Earl Carter signed legislation creating the brand-new, Cabinet-level Department of Energy.

When it comes to energy fecklessness, which was very costly to the Democratic party in the revolutionary election of 1980, Barack Obama's policies are in Mr. Carter's league. With global warming at the top of the president's agenda and at the bottom of the electorate's, a similar result may be brewing.

A trip back to 1977 reveals remarkable similarities between then and now, and some remarkable symmetries. Three consecutive winters, starting with the winter of Carter's inauguration, were the coldest trio since comprehensive instrumental records were first kept in 1895. To show his new administration's environmental sanctity, Carter had a solar-heated reviewing stand built for his inauguration. Wind chills were even lower than they were at Obama's first inauguration. The stand was so cold that very few people stuck around after the ceremony.

A week later, the lights went out in Ohio and Pennsylvania, thanks to a shortage of natural gas. The Ohio River froze so completely that people walked across from Cincinnati to Kentucky.

Less than 90 days after his inaugural, Carter addressed the nation wearing a sweater and called the "energy crisis" the "moral equivalent of war" (wags soon acronymed it MEOW). He told the American people he was convinced that the nation faced "the impending crisis of energy shortages" as we ran out of natural gas and oil. It was in this speech that Carter proposed the new Department of Energy, which was intended to guide the nation to energy abundance and independence, shifting us to an energy mix of coal, nuclear (which he regularly pronounced "noo-kie-er"), and — despite everyone's freezing at his inaugural — solar.

During the election campaign Carter's handlers had sold him as a "nuclear engineer" who had an M.S. from Union College in New York. He wasn't and he didn't (although he did take some classes at Union College in Schenectady), nor did he serve on the USS *Seawolf*, the nation's second nuclear sub. He never set the record straight, and he used the inflated biography to bolster his credibility on energy matters. (The myths still stand. According to the American Experience website, "A trained nuclear engineer, Carter worked under famed Admiral Hyman Rickover, the

father of the Navy's nuclear program, on the 'Sea Wolf,' an atomic submarine. He also studied nuclear physics at Union College in New York.”)

The “nuclear engineer” did nothing to stop the hysteria surrounding the minuscule leak of ionizing radiation that occurred in 1979 when a power reactor at Three Mile Island experienced a partial failure that was contained as designed. At that point, Carter's energy secretary, James Schlesinger, turned away from his support of carbon-containing fuels and instead allowed himself to be convinced by DOE's Michael MacCracken that global warming, caused by dreaded carbon dioxide, was a mortal threat to the planet. This raised quite a few eyebrows, as the nation had just thawed out from the last of the three wicked winters, which collectively fueled a spasm of scientific angst that climate change was indeed imminent – but in the form of a new ice age.

MacCracken predictably later became the head of the U.S. Global Change Research Program, which, every few years, produces the arrogantly shabby “National Assessments” of the effects of global warming on our country. He now heads a lucrative climate consultancy fueled by government funding.

Fast-forward to 2009. Ninety days after Obama's own bitterly cold inauguration (his inaugural address, ironically, featured global warming), his administration's EPA issued a “preliminary finding of endangerment” from carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, ultimately resulting in regulation of carbon dioxide and the trancelike perseveration on global warming that has become the hallmark of his second term.

If it makes sense to be very, very scared of greenhouse gases while turning away from nuclear power, welcome to the weird world of Washington's energy politics. Things really haven't changed since 1977. President Obama hasn't approved a single reactor for power generation, and instead continues to push solar energy (solar thermal is the single least efficient modern source of energy on the planet) and ugly wind turbines. The former, by definition, can't be on roughly half of the time, and the latter produce power only when the wind blows sufficiently hard.

It is during clear, calm nights — precisely when these sources of energy do nothing — that we see our coldest temperatures, increasing dependence mainly upon fossil-fuel-powered generation.

Things haven't changed on the alternative-fuel front, either. Carter first championed “synfuels” from coal, but switched to “biomass” (read: ethanol) when Schlesinger got global-warming religion. In the current administration, corn-based ethanol continues to raise food prices worldwide.

Finally, it's noteworthy that the Carter administration, responding to the Iranian revolution, bribed refiners to pump out more and more heating oil and diesel fuel, which resulted in less and less gasoline. Prices skyrocketed in the summer of 1979 as supplies dwindled, and long lines of cars stood waiting at gas stations, many of which imposed rationing.

Noticed the price of gas recently? Today's anniversary of the birth of the Department of Energy is a mere 90 days from the next election.

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