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Op-Ed Contributor

A Nuclear Waste

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PRESIDENT OBAMA has made clean and efficient energy a top priority, and Congress has obliged with more than \$32 billion in stimulus money mostly for conservation and alternative energy technologies like wind, solar and biofuel. Sadly, the Energy Department is too weighed down by nuclear energy programs to devote itself to bringing about the revolution Mr. Obama envisions.

Today, the department's main task is managing the thousands of facilities involved in producing nuclear weapons during the cold war, and the associated cleanup of dozens of contaminated sites. Approximately two-thirds of its annual budget, which is roughly \$27 billion, is spent on these activities, while only 15 percent is allocated for all energy programs, including managing the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and researching and developing new technologies.

The department, after all, has nuclear weapons in its DNA. It is essentially an offshoot of the Atomic Energy Commission, a civilian-run agency established in 1946 to continue the work of the Manhattan Project and to investigate the possibility of developing civilian nuclear energy. In 1974, Congress voted to abolish the commission, turning over the weapons activities to a new Energy Research and Development Administration and setting up the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The former was disbanded three years later and replaced by the Department of Energy.

Given the department's origins, it is not surprising that nuclear programs have won out over other energy technologies. Of the \$135.4 billion spent on energy research and development from 1948 to 2005 (in constant 2004 dollars), more than half, or \$74 billion, went to nuclear energy, while fossil-fuel programs received a quarter, or \$34.1 billion. The leftovers went for alternatives, with renewables getting \$13 billion, or 10 percent, and energy efficiency \$12 billion, according to a Congressional Research Service report written in 2006.

That historical pattern of spending continues to this day. This year nuclear energy research is receiving \$1.7 billion, including for a weapons-related fusion program being touted for its supposed energy potential. Nuclear weapons programs are getting \$6.4 billion, with an additional \$6.5 billion allocated to environmental cleanup. Millions more are spent on efforts to reduce the risk of weapons proliferation, and recovering nuclear and radioactive materials from around the world.

Against this background, alternative energy solutions are but an afterthought: in the current fiscal year, for example, all of \$1.1 billion is apportioned for programs falling under this category, not including the stimulus money.

The stimulus package, intended to be spent over two years, places huge demands on Secretary of Energy Steven Chu. But if Mr. Chu wishes to avoid getting dragged down by the nuclear undertow, the Energy Department must be relieved of duties that aren't related to energy.

The good news is that some in Washington already recognize this need. President Obama's new Office of Management and Budget director, Peter Orszag, has put on the table moving the National Nuclear Security Administration, which oversees a significant chunk of the Energy Department's nuclear weapons activity, into the Defense Department.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Orszag faces stiff opposition, not least from Senator Jeff Bingaman, Democrat of New Mexico. As chairman of the Senate energy committee, Mr. Bingaman may be trying to fill the shoes of Pete Domenici, who for years dominated the panel and helped ensure a steady flow of money to the weapons labs, including Los Alamos in New Mexico.

But such detractors must recognize that the cold war is over, and global warming and the need for energy independence require bold initiatives that today's Energy Department is simply not equipped to take. The department needs a major reorganization along the lines of the one that took place in 1974, when the old Atomic Energy Commission was split up. Shifting the nuclear security administration to the Pentagon is just one option. The administration could also be converted to a standalone civilian agency.

Washington could also follow the example of France and Britain and establish a national body to handle the problem of nuclear waste. Britain's Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, for example, a public body established in 2004, oversees the cleanup of Britain's nuclear legacy, including research facilities, reactors and a huge plutonium production site.

In his Inaugural Address, President Obama said, "We will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories." That is a hopeful image and a lofty aim, but it cannot happen until the Department of Energy is freed from the nuclear weapons establishment.

Stephanie Cooke is the author of the forthcoming "In Mortal Hands: A Cautionary History of the Nuclear Age."