

Opinion

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U.S. officials undervalue plutonium

By BERNARD GILBERT

San Francisco Examiner

SAN FRANCISCO — This country has a small stockpile of plutonium, accumulated at great cost of money and human effort.

Now the government wants to destroy it, to burn it or bury it deep in the earth. Hazel O'Leary, secretary of the U.S. Department of Energy, said, "The plutonium we no longer need is ... an economic liability."

Viktor M. Murogov, a top Russian scientist, calls such ideas a sacrilege. Plutonium, he said, is a "national treasure."

As they kick start the free-market energies of their newly liberated country, the former Reds have a brawling, fearless bravado our liberal so-called leaders have long forgotten. Murogov would join me, I think, in characterizing O'Leary's prudence as shortsighted penny-pinching.

What does plutonium mean? Energy. Think of the awesome power of the

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The Russians are thinking in the long term. Their experts seem to be asking, "Will our children and grandchildren be thankful to us when they experience a lack of fuel in the future?"

They plan to build breeder reactors, ingenious devices that generate energy and produce plutonium. There is never any fear of running out of fuel in a breeder reactor.

Our scientists know this. We spent almost \$2 billion on a breeder reactor around the end of the 1970s, but failed to follow through. Somebody wasn't thinking ahead. What will happen when we run out of coal, natural gas,

oil and uranium? God willing, we'll never run out of plutonium.

And yet, John Gibbons, the president's science adviser, stated, "Plutonium has essentially a negative economic value."

What are we to believe? The evidence of our eyes, or the unsolicited opinion of a man most decent Americans have never heard of?

Plutonium is, in Murogov's wise phrase, a national resource. It's a natural national resource, and it sure is durable. Its longevity and stick-to-itiveness puts the human life span to shame.

Of course, energy security, like any other kind, costs money, and money is a scarce commodity these days. Ask

the Russians; they know that. They're getting the money for their breeder reactors from us.

The U.S. government has agreed to buy hundreds of tons of weapons-grade uranium from Russia over the next 20 years, for \$10 billion or so. Our Democratic misadministration wants to make sure the uranium doesn't fall into the wrong hands.

The Russians are taking that money and using it to produce plutonium. They know what they're doing.

If a poor, benighted country still reeling from 60 years of crippling Communist tyranny can summon the vision and resources to fund its energy program, why can't good old Yankee ingenuity do the same?

Invest in the future. Save our plutonium. Think of our children, and their children, and their children's children. And let's get a real man in the White House in 1996.

■ San Francisco satirist Bernard Gilbert is a writer and performer.

— Letters to the editor —