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America Needs France's Atomic Anne

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It's not often that I find myself recommending a French state-owned industry as the answer to major U.S. problems, but I guess there's an exception to every rule.

In this case the exception is the French nuclear energy company Areva, which provides about 80 percent of the country's electricity from 58 nuclear power plants, is building a new generation of reactor that will come on line at Flamanville in 2012, and is exporting its expertise to countries from China to the United Arab Emirates.

Contrast that with the United States, where just 20 percent of electricity comes from nuclear plants, no commercial reactor has come on line since 1996, no new reactor has been ordered for decades, and debate about nuclear power remains paralyzing despite its clean-air electricity generation in the age of global warming.

Areva is headed by Anne Lauvergeon, a brilliant product of France's top schools. She's earned the sobriquet "Atomic Anne," a stylish "Vive les Nukes" saleswoman. The United States needs her equivalent to cut through its nuclear power hang-ups.

Those hesitations have been evident in this election year. Among Democrats, Barack Obama has shown most willingness (albeit guarded) to back nuclear power, with Hillary Clinton multiplying caveats and John Edwards opposed. Republican candidates are favorable, but the campaign suggests costly nuclear muddle will persist.

It's time to look to the French. They've got their heads in the right place, with nuclear power enjoying a 70 percent approval rating. The Germans, by contrast, have gone silly-Green and are shunning nuclear power. The British, more smart-Green, are reviving their plants.

I know, that word "nuclear" still sends a frisson. Images multiply of Hiroshima and Chernobyl and the partial meltdown at Three Mile Island in 1979 and waste in dangerous perpetuity, not to mention proliferation and dirty bombs.

But the lesson of the post-9/11 world is that we have to get over our fears, especially irrational ones.

Nuclear power has proved safe in both France and America — not one radiation-related death has occurred in the history of U.S. commercial nuclear power. It constitutes a vital alternative to the greenhouse-gas spewing coal-power plants that account for over 50 percent of U.S. electricity generation. Thousands of people die annually breathing the noxious particles of coal-fire installations.

Of course, wind and solar power should be developed, but even by mid-century they will satisfy only a fraction of U.S. energy needs, however much those needs are cut. Hundreds

of square miles of eyesore wind farms barely produce the electricity you get from a nuclear plant on less than a square mile.

"Nuclear power is the most efficient energy source we have," said Gwyneth Cravens, author of "Power to Save the World: The Truth About Nuclear Power." "Uranium is energy-dense. If you got all your electricity from nuclear for your lifetime, your share of the waste would fit in a soda can."

Cravens once feared this waste so much that she demonstrated against nuclear power plants, but she's come around. Like Patrick Moore, a founder of Greenpeace who once lambasted nuclear power as "criminal" and now advocates its use, she's been convinced by the evidence. That's called growing up.

Greenpeace remains opposed to nuclear power and Jim Riccio, a nuclear policy analyst for the organization, told me building more plants in the United States would be expensive, wasteful and dangerous. "Why in God's name would you want to build more targets for terrorists?" he asked.

Fair question, to which the answer is that jihadist terrorists should only dictate western energy policy to the degree that the United States and its allies try to cut dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

Where Riccio has a point is that wild cost overruns on several nuclear power plants and on the planned Yucca Mountain Repository in Nevada for radioactive waste, which will cost some \$30 billion to open, have suggested there may be better ways to spend money on energy diversification and saving.

But again the French, with the cleanest air in the industrialized world, have an answer. Their standardized design, expedited approval process, and improving technology (evident in the third-generation Evolutionary Pressurized Reactor) offer streamlined routes to cost-saving. They have also drastically reduced waste by reprocessing most of it into fuel, a long-term answer to the disposal issue.

Has the United States taken note? Congressional incentives for new nuclear plants in the 2005 Energy Policy Act and plans for some two dozen new reactors suggest the political ground may be shifting.

For one possible plant, in Maryland, Areva has joined forces with Constellation Energy, a Baltimore utility. Lauvergeon has said she wants to "reinstate" the nuclear industry in the United States.

Vive Atomic Anne! Cooperation on a new generation of American nuclear plants would be a powerful signal of the transformed Franco-U.S. relationship under President Nicolas Sarkozy.