

because of an awareness that one disaster would spell the certain end of the program.³

Although energy policy had not been a major issue in the 1976 presidential campaign, soon after his election President Carter described the energy crisis, and its testing of the nation, as “the moral equivalent of war.”* He requested the creation of an energy department to wage this battle. The Department of Energy (DOE) came into being on 1 October 1977, with James R. Schlesinger as its first secretary.⁴ The competition nuclear energy had encountered at ERDA increased at DOE. In addition to focusing on the full range of energy options, the new department melded some 5,000 staff from the Department of Interior, almost 4,000 from the Federal Energy Administration; some 1,500 from the Federal Power Commission, and nearly 9,000 from the now disbanded ERDA.⁵

Several actions and events during Carter’s first days at the White House suggest a retreat from a Federal policy of embracing nuclear technology. Even before the establishment of DOE, the president announced that the United States would defer indefinitely the reprocessing of spent fuel from civilian reactors and delay construction of the Clinch River Fast Breeder Reactor.⁶ A short while later, when a Soviet spy satellite containing a nuclear reactor fell in northwest Canada in January 1978, President Carter initially assured the public that the United States would not fly such devices in space. He was later to soften this position to make it less unequivocal.⁷ Fourteen months later, in March 1979, a loss-of-coolant accident occurred at the General Public Utilities’ commercial reactor Three Mile Island Unit 2.⁸ Sensational press coverage resulted in intensified public concern over the risk of lethal radiation from any form of nuclear energy. By this time, however, even the strongest supporters of nuclear energy in Congress could no longer speak through the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, whose disbanding had been approved concurrently with the passage of the legislation creating DOE and its responsibilities divided among a half dozen House and Senate committees.

Some in the RTG program felt strongly about the changing environment. When the AEC building was transferred to ERDA, the broadened scope of energy programs placed those working on nuclear programs in the minority,

*A phrase borrowed from the philosopher William James.