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OPINION

As Japan Crisis Unfolds, Energy Secretary Steven Chu Fails Nuclear and Leadership Test

By Iain Murray
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With reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in danger of a meltdown, the world waits with bated breath for the outcome. Interestingly, physicists, the people who typically know the most about nuclear reactions, appear to be less concerned than the general public. This should be a time for the country's most important physicist, Energy Secretary [Steven Chu](#), to step up to the plate and explain to Americans why he is not worried. Instead, the Secretary is missing in action.

At first glance, the events at Fukushima seem like a perfect illustration of Murphy's Law – "If something can go wrong, it will." First the plant was hit by an earthquake seven times stronger than it was designed to withstand, but withstand it did. Control rods were immediately lowered into the core and the chain reaction stopped. Backup power kicked in.

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Then a massive tsunami hit the plant, reportedly demolishing several key installations and knocking out the backup power. The plant continued to run on emergency power.

When the emergency power ran out, the backup emergency power didn't work (due to backup facilities using the wrong plugs, according to some reports). Hydrogen buildup from the rapidly heating core caused explosions in the shell (which is designed to keep the elements out, not radiation in). Attempts to cool the reactor with seawater started too late, leading to the fuel rods being exposed rather than covered in coolant.

Fortunately, even Murphy's Law has its exceptions. Despite all these problems, the reactor – at this writing – was damaged but not yet in meltdown. No one had been exposed to dangerous amounts of radiation and no dangerous material had been released into the surrounding environment. In other words, despite virtually everything going wrong in unforeseeable ways, the reactor has as yet caused no wider harm to people.

Yet you wouldn't know that from the loud calls by politicians and environmental advocacy groups for the United States to abandon nuclear power, claiming it is inherently dangerous.

The Obama administration, to its credit, disagrees. Its proposed energy plan relies on the building of 100 new nuclear reactors in the near to medium term, to allow us to replace coal as America's main generator of electricity. During Monday's [White House](#) press briefing, spokesmen from the Department of Energy and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission told reporters that the events in Japan gave no reason to abandon this plan.

Such statements from middle-rank officials are likely to be ignored, and could thus hobble the president's own [energy policy](#). Yet sitting near [President Obama](#) around the Cabinet table is our energy secretary who just also happens to be a Nobel-prize winning physicist. Steven Chu has both the authority and the credibility to put paid to scaremongering and refocus America's energy debate to where it should be: the price of oil.

So far, however, Secretary Chu has shown no willingness to tackle public fears regarding the crisis in Japan, beyond a few words of boilerplate at a House hearing on the Energy Department budget on Tuesday morning. One would assume that the White House would want Dr. Chu to be actively making the case for its energy policy—unless they think that the Secretary is simply not up to the job.

This is especially unfortunate when major environmental advocacy groups (including some with whom Secretary Chu has associated) have exploited the Japanese disaster for political advantage.

Sadly, America's news organizations have taken their bait, by shifting their focus away from the massive devastation and thousands of dead and concentrating instead on something that has yet to kill anyone. I wouldn't be surprised if Greenpeace's donations have gone up—perhaps at the expense of the [Red Cross](#).

Steven Chu is uniquely placed to shift the nation's attention to where it needs to be. The fact that he has not done so exhibits a massive failure of leadership.

Iain Murray is a Vice President at the [Competitive Enterprise Institute](#).

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