

United States Atomic Energy Commission formed, part 2

As we continue looking at the transition of thinking that led to the United States Atomic Energy Commission and away from a United Nations Atomic Energy Commission, we see a move toward nationalism and away from international control. Much of this change took place as a direct result of failed attempts to gain agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union.

What was happening in the Soviet Union and the United Nations contributed to the change in posture of the United States. The suspicion that the Soviet Union was working on an atomic bomb, the knowledge that Great Britain was fast approaching having the capability made some United States decision makers reconsider their earlier position to share the knowledge gained from the Manhattan Project.

The speed with which the United States was producing uranium 235 and plutonium also contributed to the changes in the outlook of those making the decisions regarding sharing information on atomic energy. Y-12 was producing uranium 235 at ever increasing speed. Hanford was producing more plutonium at a faster pace as well. There was no slackening of the pace, only encouragement to make as much of the materials as possible and do it quickly.

Many changed their minds regarding the value of the knowledge of atomic energy and the leverage it provided in international relations. By the time the act was in its final form, even our allies were not to be granted access to further developments in atomic energy. This was a radical shift in the United States decision makers' thinking.

At the same time speculation was rampant about the many potential uses for the radical new energy. The scientists could hardly keep up with the wild imaginations of the politicians and other speculators. While they tried hard to keep the factual information before the public, it was the sensational that reigned.

Nuclear physicist Alvin M. Weinberg told the Senate's Special Committee on Atomic Energy in December 1945: "Atomic power can cure as well as kill. It can fertilize and enrich a region as well as devastate it. It can widen man's horizons as well as force him back into the cave."

Newsweek observed that ideas for the civilian uses of atomic energy ranged "from the practical to the fantastic," it cited a few examples: atomic-powered airplanes, rockets, and even automobiles.

It went on to say that large electrical generating stations and small "home power plants" were likely. There was even speculation that tiny atomic generators would be wired to clothing to keep a person cool in summer and warm in winter.

To reach these most promising results of nuclear energy would take years. The government's first priority was to maintain strict control over atomic energy technology. There was great fear that other nations would soon attempt to produce atomic bombs.

The Atomic Energy Act of 1946, passed as tensions with the Soviet Union were developing into the Cold War. The impact of this shift from uneasy friend to foe did not happen over night; however, it was already coming into play even before the World War II ended. Churchill especially feared the worst and sought the United States help to hasten decisions that would preclude the Soviet Union's aggressive tendencies to claim captured land.

Therefore, the Atomic Energy Act still emphasized the military aspects of nuclear energy. It also cited the strong need for secrecy regarding the technology. It also included the need to produce more new weapons. The 1946 law created a virtual government monopoly of the technology.

Next we will look at who was selected to serve on the five-member Atomic Energy Commission. We will also look at the direct impact that decision had on Oak Ridge.