"THE PUBLIC" VS. "THE EXPERTS":

PERCEIVED VS. ACTUAL DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT RISKS OF NUCLEAR POWER*

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A recent public opinion survey (Harris, 1980) reported the following three results:

a) Among four "leadership groups" (top corporate executives, investors/lenders, Congressional representatives and federal regulators), 94-98% of all respondents agreed with the statement "even in areas in which the actual level of risk may have decreased in the past 20 years, our society is significantly more aware of risk."

b) Between 87% and 91% of those four leadership groups felt that "the mood of the country regarding risk" will have a substantial or moderate impact "on investment decisions - that is, the allocation of capital in our society in the decade ahead." (The remainder believed that it would have a minimal impact, no impact at all, or were not sure.)

c) No such consensus was found, however, when these groups were asked about the appropriateness of this concern about risk. A majority of the top corporate executives and a plurality of lenders believed that "American society is overly sensitive to risk," whereas

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In summary, there is great agreement that risk decisions will have a major role in shaping our society's future and that those decisions will, in turn, be shaped by public perceptions of risk. There is, however, much disagreement about the appropriateness of those perceptions. Some believe the public to be wise; others do not. These contrary beliefs imply rather different roles for public involvement in risk management. As a result, the way in which this disagreement is resolved will affect not only the fate of particular technologies, but also the fate of our society and its social organization.

The views about risk perceptions given by the respondents to this poll, like those offered by other commentators on the contemporary scene, are, at best, based on intense, but unsystematic observation. At worst, they represent attempts to bias the political process by promulgating self-serving beliefs. Such happens, for example, when one claims that people are so poorly informed (and uneducable) that they require paternalistic institutions to defend them or that they would be better off surrendering some of their political rights to technical experts. It also happens, at the other extreme, when one claims that people are so well informed (and offered such freedom of choice) that they can fend for themselves in the marketplace and need no governmental protection.

Like speculations about chemical reactions, speculations about human nature need to be disciplined by fact. To that end, various investigators have been studying how and how well people think about risks. Although the results of that research are not definitive as yet, they do clearly indicate that a careful diagnosis is needed whenever "the public" and the "the experts" appear to disagree. It is seldom adequate to attribute all such discrepancies as reflecting public misperceptions. From a factual perspective, that assumption is often wrong; from a societal perspective, it is generally corrosive by encouraging disrespect between the parties involved. When the available research data do not allow one to make a confident diagnosis, a sounder assumption is that there is some method in anyone's apparent madness. The present essay suggests some ways to find that method. Specifically, it offers six reasons why disagreements between the public and the experts need not be interpreted as clashes between actual and perceived risks.*

*Fuller expositions of the research upon which this summary is based may be found in sources such as Fischhoff, Slovic, and Lichtenstein (1980; 1982), Green (1982), Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichtenstein (1980), Vlek and Stallen (1980), and Warner and Slater (1981).