"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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a large majority of Congressional representatives and federal regu-
lators believed that "we are becoming more aware of risk and taking
realistic precautions." A sample of the public endorsed the latter
statement over the former by 78% - 15%.

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 or-
ganization.

The views about risk perceptions given by the respondents to
this poll, like those offered by other commentators on the contem-
porary scene, are, at best, based on intense, but unsystematic ob-
servation. At worst, they represent attempts to bias the political
process by promulgating self-serving beliefs. Such happens, for ex-
ample, when one claims that people are so poorly informed (and un-
educable) 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 cor-
rrosive 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 any-
one'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
Vlek and Stallen (1980), and Warner and Slater (1981).