

March 19, 2006

The Fission Thing

If, like me, you are a little bemused by all this nuclear gobbledygook fizzing around, welcome to the club. Never before has so few acronyms defeated so many people, and as we decipher the alphabet-soup of NPT, FMCT, CTBT, FBTR, NSG etc, let us resolve never again to be unclear about matters nuclear, including different ways to pronounce this vogue-word: the Bush-style "nuclear," the American-mode "noo-clear," the Punjabi style "new-kilier," and the Malayalee zstyle "noog-lear."

On a recent visit home, one realized with some alarm that millions of people had boned up on all things nuclear, while laggard that I am, I was still karmic about all things atomic. A lately-learned colleague, who wouldn't have known fusion from fission till a couple of years back, lectured me on detritiation and nuclear weapon cores while I kicked myself for missing Dr HN's physics classes in favor of Dr KDN's Eng. Lit., all in pursuit of a doe-eyed lass who preferred Keats to Curie.

Fate lot of good that did me. Our separation plan ensued over graduation, on account of my being insufficiently enriched I suspect, although she tearfully declaimed it was all physics and no chemistry. MOX on her, I say. As a result of my sacrifice, the only fast breeder I got to know was a canine queen who littered a dozen one time, causing a chain reaction of awe and wonder up and down the street.

Still, journalists are expected to be generalists and I've been huffing away lately on nuclear studies, so rest assured I am not going to be looking for a thorium cycle on eBay any time soon. When Congress begins hearings on the nuclear deal later this month, expect me to be in top form, with such command over fuel cycles that it will be the envy of Lance Armstrong. To paraphrase a popular presidential slogan of yesteryears, I Like Bike.

Jokes apart, I don't have to look beyond the front yard of my Washington DC home to figure out this nuclear deal. Let me explain. Returning to the U.S last week after getting singed by the Bush fire in India, one was surprised by the pilot's announcement ahead of landing that the outside temperature was 85 deg F. That's about 30 deg C, which for early March, is a shocker -- shorts and t-shirt weather.

But it's been that way on and off through winter. Snow storms have alternated with 70 F days. One balmy day in January, as the sun blazed out, the tulip bulbs in my garden popped up, asking if spring was already here. Not really, said a frosty day that followed, freezing the aspiring tulip the day after. And for those of us prone to spring allergy, April is usually the cruelest month. But here we are in mid-March and our sinuses are already snarling angrily at offending pollen and we are shedding tears of irritation.

So for anyone who lives in these parts and realizes that strange things are afoot and underfoot (especially weather-provoked flower bulbs), the nuclear deal is a no-brainer, especially if you believe it's mostly because two countries are guzzling gas by gazillion gallons and belching out greenhouse gas in quantities sufficient to punch a giant hole in the ozone cover. That's not rocket science and no proliferation argument can withstand the power of tulip bulbs gone ballistic in winter. As Adlai Stevenson, who someone described as the best president America never had, said, "There is no evil in the atom -- only in men's souls."
