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Section G

Sneak Attack

HONEST DISAGREEMENT exists over whether this nation should go ahead with nuclear breeder reactors. Opponents say the breeders would create unacceptable environmental and safety hazards. Supporters say the nation has to have the energy that the breeders would produce. Unfortunately, on the eve of a crucial vote by the Senate Energy Committee, the issues have been confused and obscured by a last-minute lobbying effort to discredit the proposed breeder site near Oak Ridge.

The sudden release of a four-year-old "report" challenging the site smacks of election-eve charges leveled too late for an answer before the votes are cast. In this case, opponents have jumped in with a demand for Senate hearings to investigate the alleged criticisms of the site. That could delay a Senate decision for many months or a year.

Sen. Jim Sasser (D-Tenn.), a leading advocate of the Clinch River project, suggests that the Carter administration may have leaked the so-called "report" to get the project axed. Carter opposes breeder technology on grounds that it could lead to the proliferation of atomic weapons. An antinuclear environmentalist named Jim Cubie, a former associate of Ralph Nader, specifically has been identified as the person who handed out copies of the "report" on Capitol Hill.

It is strange that the charges have lain around for four years without surfacing before, especially in view of the intense and lengthy debate over the breeder. The Energy Development and Research Administration presumably had a copy. Surely Carter's staff knew about it. The suspicion can't be avoided that the charges aren't as substantial as the opponents claim they are.

The "report," says the engineering firm that's in charge of the Clinch River project, actually was a "company memorandum" aimed at identifying potential problems. As a result, the firm says, "The technical questions discussed in the memorandum have been fully and completely resolved" This sort of advanced planning is certainly common enough in business and industry. At the same time, the firm has a large vested interest in providing such an explanation for the criticisms.

BUT IT'S THE manner in which the lobbying has been conducted, not a rational discussion of the issues, that has created these last-minute uncertainties. And, although supporters of the project undoubtedly have used their own bag of tricks, this incident reflects, sadly enough, on the environmentalists.

The battle over environmental questions, from the snail darter to the protection of park lands to nuclear energy, has

become marred by a trend of emotionalism, demagoguery and simplistic sloganeering. It's unfortunate that those who have taken on the important cause of guarding the environment and public safety should have found it necessary to resort to such tactics. By fighting fire with fire, by using any means to achieve their ends, they lay themselves open to the charge that they're no better than the despoilers and polluters they attack.

At the beginning of the environmental movement, many of its members were laughed at as "little old ladies in tennis shoes." Memphians saw that phase of public reaction in the controversy over putting I-40 through Overton Park. That was an unwise and unfair characterization of sincere and highly motivated persons.

SINCE THEN, environmentalists in general have achieved respectability and well-earned power and influence. Their contributions to a saner, safer society have been significant. But they are starting to drift into the kind of opportunism and militancy that can subject them once more to public ridicule. Many of their reactions to environmental problems have become so predictable as to be easy butts for satire. The snail darter, for instance, seems to have been practically deified by some as an indispensable link in the ecosystem chain. If the darter is destroyed by a TVA dam, they imply, the whole intricate interplay of life on Earth may be threatened. If the snail darter goes, indeed, who knows what form of life may be next? Maybe the redwoods will topple. Maybe pollywogs will stop turning into frogs. Maybe giraffes will lose their taste for leaves.

We view this trend among environmentalists more with sorrow than anger. By risking ridicule, they also take the risk that their arguments will be dismissed out of hand by an equally thoughtless counter-reaction. That would be a serious loss in the crucial debates over the nation's future.

THE SENATE Energy Committee took up the Clinch River project again Friday. Tie votes defeated proposals to kill it and to cut back funding. But proponents apparently will have just as hard a job to keep the project on schedule. The committee chairman, Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.), has said he's trying to work out a compromise that will avoid a confrontation with President Carter on the issue. That's a practical approach for two reasons: Congress probably doesn't have the votes to override a veto, and breeder technology shouldn't be simply left in limbo. Breeder reactors can be an important part of a national energy program into the next century. Their development should continue at whatever level is politically possible.

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