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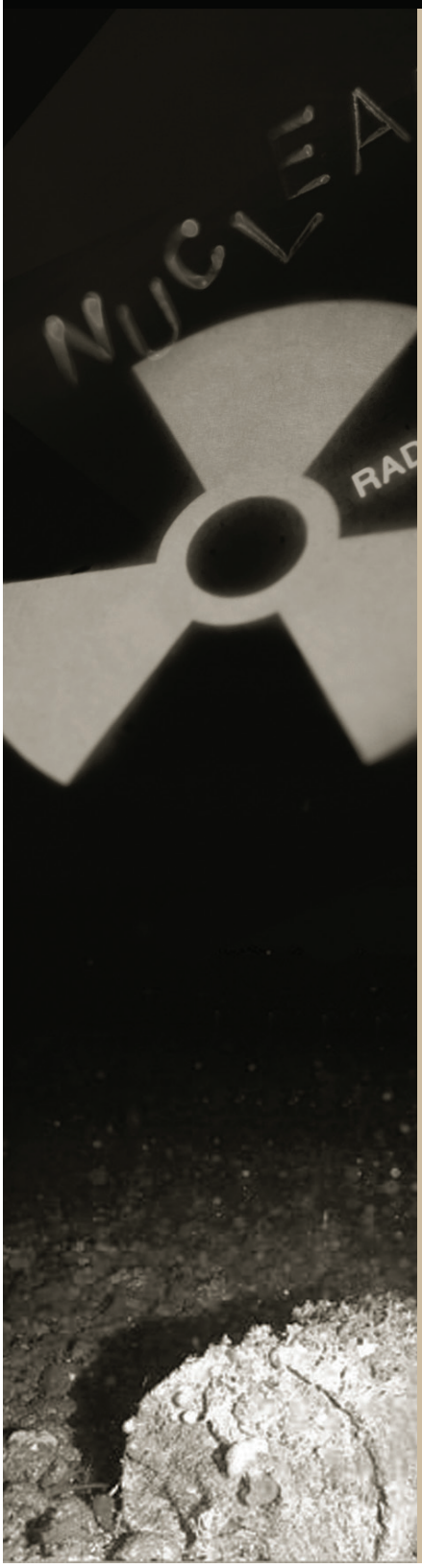

The Nuclear Promise: Global Consequences of an American Dream

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About the John O'Sullivan Memorial Lecture

In the spring of 2004, a group of senior citizen students at Florida Atlantic University paid tribute to John O'Sullivan, a beloved professor of history who died in 2000, by establishing a Memorial Fund to support an annual lecture in his honor.

In keeping with John's commitment to teaching, research, and community outreach, the mission of the John O'Sullivan Memorial Lectureship is to broaden and deepen public understanding of modern U.S. history. The Memorial Fund — which is administered by the Department of History — sponsors public lectures and classroom seminars by some of the most distinguished scholars and gifted teachers of American history. The lectures typically focus on topics relevant to Professor O'Sullivan's specialties in 20th Century U.S. history, including: World War II, the Vietnam War, the nuclear age, the Holocaust, peace history, political and diplomatic affairs, and other topics.

John O'Sullivan Memorial Lecture

The Nuclear Promise: Global Consequences of an American Dream

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Author's note: This paper was written for presentation as a lecture, with incomplete citations. I encourage any readers to contact me directly with questions, comments, or criticisms at *jacob.hamblin@oregonstate.edu*

I would like to begin with two kinds of thanks. One is a conventional kind of gratitude: I have flown in from Oregon at the dawn of the 9-month rainy season… to Florida! But even aside from that, I am honored to be asked to deliver the John O'Sullivan Memorial Lecture, and I thank the historians at Florida Atlantic University for the generous invitation. I hope you will agree that the topic is not only timely, given the unfortunate tragedy in Japan earlier this year, but also important for our future.

The second word of thanks is a kind of guilty pleasure, and it goes to that villain to U.S. national security, Julian Assang--ls about Wikileaks. I refer to the extremely controversial online disclosure of a huge number of classified diplomatic cables, made available to major newspapers around the world and now searchable via internet. Maybe you think of it as an affront to decency, as a betrayal of trust; maybe you think of it is good work in the service of democracy. I'm only a historian, and at the end of the day, historians are just folks who like to read other people's mail. The Wikileaks cables are the kinds of documents normally we would be able to read fifty years from now. Most are quite dull! And they are precisely the sorts of things I used to write my first couple of books on science and international relations during the Cold War. We've just gotten the documents earlier.

It is clear from Wikileaks cables that the change of guard at the International Atomic Energy Agency from the Egyptian Mohammad ElBaradei to the Japanese Yukiya Amano represented—to Americans, anyway—a sea change in the nuclear world. A return, one might say, to America's nuclear dream. Apparently the problem was that as the IAEA's director-general, ElBaradei behaved like a politician. He wanted to act as a kind of mediator between the US and those who broke the rules in the name of their own national interests. Here I refer to Iran in particular. When Amano came on board in 2009, Americans saw him as a harbinger of great things to come in the nuclear world.

At the end of Amano's first day on the job, American diplomat Esther Brimmer paid him a visit[1]. She wanted to assure him of America's full support. Amano was grateful, and assured Brimmer of his total agreement that his job was not to play politics. As the cable put it, *"Amano was acutely conscious of staying in his technical lane as IAEA Director General."* The agency under him would steer away from advising countries and **focus on promotion**, specifically the need to *"address global issues through the use of nuclear technology."* He wanted to achieve more *"buy-in"* by other countries, particularly those in the developing world. Less emphasis on security issues, and more emphasis on helpful applications. He had in mind a number of specifics, such as cancer control, and programs to promote water and food access. Together, Brimmer and Amano agreed that nuclear technology was an ideal way to ease the divisions between the industrialized North and the impoverished South.

Amano was promising to embrace **his role as a promoter—a salesman**—of nuclear energy solutions around the world. For decades, American scientists and diplomats had marveled at the agency's ability to promote **obscure nuclear technologies** in the developing world, even after they had been abandoned elsewhere, and even **against intense pressure from other UN agencies to stop.**

Amano's vision was a perfect reflection of the nuclear promise of the 1950s and 1960s, before the Agency got bogged down in its responsibilities to enforce nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. Before it earned the name *"nuclear watchdog."*

A brief word on the IAEA and nuclear power. Nuclear power is the only form of energy, bar none, to enjoy widespread political and moral support at such a high level. The IAEA, with more than 150 members, is a United Nations Specialized Agency, with autonomous powers similar to UNESCO and the World Health Organization. It has global influence, yet it only has one solution to energy problems—nuclear. **One might argue that it is a hammer in search of a nail.** It has promoted nuclear solutions to anything from electricity generation to insect control. There is no comparable energy agency with a more balanced energy agenda. There is an International Energy Agency, but it was founded as an economic consortium of mostly Western, industrialized powers in response to the early 1970s energy crisis. It has less than thirty members. At the UN level, there is only the IAEA.

The IAEA's existence is a result of American geopolitical aims. Against the backdrop of the Korean War, the Cold War, and advent of the hydrogen bomb, President Dwight Eisenhower determined in late 1953 that the United States needed some better public relations. So he made a speech, later called the "Atoms for Peace" speech, suggesting that the United States should share the unprecedented power of the atom with the rest of the world. The atom could be turned into a friend, and the bounty would come from the United States. The promotion of nuclear power around the world, **through the IAEA (created with an American, Sterling Cole, as its head in 1957)**, has been the policy of the United States ever since. Multitudes of poor countries joined, looking for quick fixes to their economic problems and the prestige of adopting a cutting edge technology.

Like most UN Specialized Agencies, the IAEA'S activities have tended to follow the agendas of its directors-general. After Cole's tenure ended in 1961, the Swede Sigvard Eklund took the helm and managed the agency for two decades. Unlike Cole, who had been a lawyer and politician, Eklund was a nuclear physicist who embraced the peaceful atom in every possible way, well beyond electricity. He **sponsored activities in medical studies, grain disinfestation, food irradiation, agricultural studies using radioactive tracers, mutation plant breeding, and the sterile-male insect control technique.** Even as some of these ideas lost traction in the United States and Europe, the IAEA kept them alive, offering moral and financial support and credibility to scientists applying for funding at home. If it involved radioactive material and **could conceivably find some peaceful application,** the IAEA was interested in it.

The *"watchdog"* status came to dominate the IAEA after Eklund departed. When the law professor Hans Blix (another Swede) took over the Agency in 1981, amidst the bombing of Iraq's nuclear weapons facility by Israel, the Agency more and more reflected **Blix's interest in monitoring and verification.** Blix was in charge during the first Gulf War. His successor, the Egyptian Mohamed ElBaradei, took over in 1997 and was **deeply enmeshed in the politics of detecting weapons of mass destruction preceding the second Gulf War.** He and the Agency won the Nobel Peace Prize for their nonproliferation efforts, but behind the scenes, American diplomats disliked his attempts to play politics. And as I mentioned, the Americans were much happier with his successor, Japanese diplomat Yukiya Amano, who issued matter-of-fact statements about Iran's failures to comply with the UN.

But Amano was not planning to be a US lapdog. He had hoped to return the Agency to its fundamental purpose, namely the **promotion of peaceful applications of the atom.**

In his first year, Amano took this new/old direction very seriously. He openly criticized the characterization of the IAEA as a watchdog. He started a cancer awareness campaign. He started a pro-nuclear campaign to convince countries to adopt nuclear power. He urged insurance companies to back power plants, and banks to lend.

Then disaster struck on March 11, 2011. Earthquake. Tsunami. Nuclear accident at Fukushima. Radioactive contamination. People started calling it 3/11, echoing the way Americans talk about 9/11.

As the disaster mounted, and the IAEA upgraded its status from one with only "local consequences" to a "major accident" comparable in magnitude to Chernobyl, **Amano undoubtedly sensed the weight of nuclear history descending upon Japan.** Two atomic bombs in 1945, the first major fallout controversy in 1954 (afflicting Japanese fishermen aboard the *Lucky Dragon*), a robust nuclear power industry, and now the worst nuclear disaster in decades. It must have been a delicate task, **balancing his Agency responsibilities with the expectations of his government, the political pressures from Japanese nuclear industries to downplay the accident, and his own personal feelings as a Japanese citizen.** But in the end, he was still the IAEA Director-General. After meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan (who later was forced to resign because of his handling of the crisis), Amano stated confidently that Fukushima **would slow the expansion of nuclear power, but it would not stop it.** As of September 2011, the IAEA still has the same outlook: the future is nuclear.

Let me pause here to make a disclaimer. I have no idea how this audience feels about nuclear power. I am not here to defend it or to call for its abandonment. I am here as a historian. I don't see conversations about nuclear power as frank discussions of one particular kind of energy. I see them rooted in time and place, thoroughly entwined in politics, foreign policy, science, economic thought, and the ideological conflicts of the Cold War.

What I'd like to emphasize today is the promotion of nuclear activities at the international level. The most obvious form of promotion is nuclear power. The Fukushima reactor complex, for example, began construction in 1967 at the zenith of global enthusiasm for nuclear solutions. But electricity generation was only one such solution, and I contend that we can understand the global consequences of this American dream far better if we explore some of the lesser known applications of atomic energy. There is a host of others, and the IAEA promoted them all. That will lead us, I hope, to a conclusion that provokes serious questions about the activities of supposedly neutral international bodies and the uses of science and technology to pursue political aims.

Now let's go back to the early period, to the first peacetime tests of atomic bombs, at the Pacific proving grounds in 1946.

Here's something we never learn about: American botanists had the foresight to bring seeds of barley, wheat, and oats with them for these tests of atomic bombs. The seeds exposed to one particular explosion—code named ABLE—were then grown in Arizona. The mutants were collected and planted again. Botanist Luther Smith discovered that at least one of these mutants was dominant. It was a golden-colored durum wheat, and the dominant gene was passed on according to genetic laws. Here was a clear case of atomic radiation introducing an important and viable gene (not just a damaged chromosome) into nature. Smith soon died of cancer—at age 43—and others continued his work.[2]

Scientists used such findings to argue that **mutation plant breeding might provide the key to guided evolutionary change.**

Swedish scientist Diter von Wettstein claimed:

> *"We have found that by radiation we can get almost anything out of a plant we really want. Most food plants are rather old-fashioned, and their variations have been exhausted by many years of inbreeding. They need to be reconstructed to suit the needs of modern agriculture, with its emphasis on high yield and mechanization. We now have an instrument with which we can rebuild all the food plants in the world."*[3]

It was powerful imagery—*rebuilding* nature. It took hold in press coverage of atomic energy applications in agriculture. For example, in the United States, Walton C. Gregory gained some attention for planting and selecting better peanuts—thicker shells, higher yielding, taller (thus more easily harvested)—from seed goobers that he had sent to Oak Ridge to be irradiated. "Radiation has also brightened the Gregory garden," *Popular Mechanics* enthused. "When Mrs. Gregory was nostalgic for the hibiscus of her Florida childhood, Dr. Gregory planted some but found that they didn't bloom until October, a few weeks before the frost killed them. By irradiating a few hundred plants, he produced a hibiscus that blooms in the late summer, thus moving the plant's habitat a few hundred miles north."[4] **With atomic energy, scientists could design, shape, and rebuild nature.**

Agriculture became a key part of promoting nuclear solutions. At the first International Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy, held in Geneva in 1954, several agricultural experiments were on display. One was the "White Sim" carnation, in which the typical red streak apparently had been wiped clean, giving the appearance of a pure white flower. An American creation, the White Sim stood out among many other examples that promised a future of pretty flowers, early harvests, abundant timber, and foods of endless variety.[5]

Did the science match the rhetoric? Most agricultural specialists **belittled mutation breeding as unproven and wasteful** compared to conventional breeding methods. Instead of producing new organisms on order, irradiation was just adding mutants, mostly deleterious, to an already crowded gene pool.

The IAEA claimed that this was cutting edge work emerging from top laboratories, **but if we look closer, we can see that this was a marginal activity.** For example, the center of the universe for plant irradiation was at Brookhaven National Laboratory, in New York, where Arnold H. Sparrow had begun a large-scale program on what was known as "radiosensitivity" research. Although this work arguably made contributions to the development of new beneficial mutations, **its main justification was in studying the effects of radiation exposure from nuclear weapons and fallout.** Sparrow set out to study the effects of radiation exposure to many different kinds of plants, at varying degrees of radiation exposure, using Cobalt sources producing thousand of curies. These studies were designed to understand how what load of radiation could be absorbed by trees, crops, and foliage **in the event of nuclear catastrophe, or of long-term exposure to continuous doses of radiation.**[6]

Brookhaven's research easily captured the public imagination in an era of comic books and science fiction. Here mutants were produced—on purpose—by intense radioactivity, apparently with scientists standing by to pick out beneficial ones. These experiments carried the imagery of nuclear disaster and biological corruption. As one journalist described Brookhaven:

> *"Trees and shrubs near the center of this weird plantation, where the radiation is strongest, are twisted and gnarled as in a landscape by a mad painter, and the farther you walk from the hidden cobalt slug, the more normal the plants appear."*[7]

This gamma field was yielding some marginally interesting results. Some peach mutants were ripening faster than usual, and they managed to get clingstone peaches to grow on freestone peach trees. Since baby food producers preferred clingstones, this was advertised as good news.[8]

All these were scientific curiosities. The studies were not designed to feed people in the developing world. And yet scientists encouraged the view that they were using atomic energy to tame agriculture.

Sparrow and other scientists at Brookhaven were dismissive about the usefulness of gamma fields for economically important agricultural research. They argued that this kind of work was best left to countries with high levels of technical competence and agricultural development.

That is not what happened, however. Instead, the staunchest supporters of this kind of research were in the countries of the developing world, which saw it as a genuine effort by the IAEA to extend modern techniques to them.

The IAEA received letters from around the world, showing an interest in mutation plant breeding far out of proportion to what was expected. Newly-communist Cuba, for example, told the agency that it wanted to start gamma field experiments. Under its 1959 Agrarian Reform Law, Cuba had confiscated and redistributed large land holdings. The architect of that legislation, the revolutionary leader Che Guevara, was the institute's first leader. It had its own military and was charged with enforcing massive the sociopolitical changes in the country. By 1964 the institute was looking to start improving crop yields with radiation.

Meanwhile, the IAEA looked for a good "success story." One possibility was in North Africa and the Middle East, where the agency sponsored the Uniform International Trials of Durum Wheat. Durum wheat ("hard" wheat) was used in pasta, couscous, and the bulgur often found in Middle East dishes such as tabbouleh.

In Egypt and Iran, new mutants had not performed well compared to local varieties—usually they required expensive fertilizer to keep growing.

In other places, such as Israel and Turkey, the durum wheat mutants were faring well compared to local varieties. **So the IAEA courted Israeli and Turkish scientists to apply for aid.** If any of these varieties could be shown as viable, it would be a great public relations success for the IAEA. Agency officials helped them to write their grant applications, even giving them template verbiage that explicitly stated that the trials had improved the wheat yields.

Had the durum wheat trials really proven their value? This is a matter of perspective. They started as an apparent improvement to pasta in Italy. The Italian standard was an old variety called Cappelli, which not only was delicious but also was high-yielding by the standards of times past. However, in recent years Italian farmers had made intensive use of chemical fertilizer, introducing new kinds of bread wheat that responded well to it. When such fertilizer was applied to the Cappelli wheat, it grew taller and often "lodged," bending over or breaking. The fertilizer actually *decreased* yields. So scientists started to irradiate Cappelli seeds. In the IAEA's telling of events, the two most successful mutants from this, Castelfusano and Castelporziano, were shorter and stronger than Cappelli, and—because of the fertilizer—higher-yielding than Cappelli. One IAEA official wrote, "their grain quality remains nearly the same as that of Cappelli for one of the mutants; the other has a quality that is lower but still acceptable."[9]

In their efforts to persuade developing countries that there were in fact "good" mutants to use, IAEA scientists met fierce resistance from within their own ranks. That resistance was swiftly quashed and such scientists were marginalized. Botanist Ronald Silow began to issue strong statements against the entire program on induced mutations.[10] The official report on the durum wheat trials stated that some of the mutants tested in nine countries in North Africa and the Middle East had out-yielded all local and other common varieties. Silow wrote that these statements were patently contrary to the scientific evidence available, and that member governments are being led to the false conclusion that radiation-induced mutation has already provided varieties of wheat better than any other varieties available to farmers. That criticism is only in the archives—it never saw the light of day.[11]

A few key scientists in developing countries were building impressive research programs and the IAEA gave them as much political support as possible. In India, M.S. Swaminathan was gaining notoriety for his work increasing the protein content of wheat. He had taken some recently-introduced wheat varieties had begun to irradiate them. One of the results was a new variant that was amber-colored, likely to attract more consumers. Moreover, it appeared to be high in lysine, an essential amino acid found in higher levels in animal proteins rather than plants. In 1967 Swaminathan said that these levels were nearly comparable to the lysine found in milk protein. **Because such protein was crucial for child brain development, he wrote,** the new wheat offered a cheap and practical way of "diminishing the threat of intellectual dwarfism."[12]

At last, the IAEA seemed to have a truly impressive success story in an ideal region of the world: radiation had paved the way to addressing protein deficiency in India, a country under immense population pressure.

But some scientists argued that this approach—trying to improve protein content—came at a high cost. They pointed out that India's stress on raising lysine content might disrupt the balance of other essential amino acids in the grain.

Scientists at the IAEA had quick answers to this and all other objections. Did Swaminathan's approach cast aside the importance of vitamins, minerals, and fats? Maybe, they acknowledged, but these easily could be added as supplements. Did it also refuse to assess the relative merits of animal and plant protein in Asians' diets? Yes. But as IAEA officials argued that the simplest solution would be to improve protein content in those crops that already were acceptable as part of the commerce and diet of the local people. **In other words, if people were willing to buy wheat, then it made sense to alter it to suit dietary needs rather than try to convince people to buy something different.** This was precisely what Swaminathan was supposedly adept at doing—altering something that already was accepted by consumers.

Upon closer inspection, the protein results could not be verified. Swaminathan gradually backed off his claim, and **grudgingly the IAEA did too.** In the end, what began as a strong claim about directing nature to solve the protein crisis was soon downgraded to a convenient change of color that suited the market better.

The political stakes had been high. **There was even a suicide over it, an Indian scientist named Vinod Shah who had felt pressure to provide Swaminathan with only positive results.** Shah addressed his suicide note to Swaminathan, complaining of many inequities in the laboratory. "I think the time has come again that a scientist will have to sacrifice his life in disgust so that other scientists may get proper treatment," he wrote, claiming that "a lot of unscientific data are collected and passed on to you to fit your line of thinking." The

tragic event sparked an outcry in the scientific community and beyond, provoking the Indian government to conduct an inquiry into the activities of the Indian Council for Agricultural Research, of which Swaminathan now was director.[13]

Eager to play up the importance of its work, the IAEA claimed throughout the 1980s that nuclear techniques had played a significant role in the Green Revolution.

The important thing was to impress upon the world the importance of mutation breeding in the Green Revolution:

> *"At the present time, nearly 1000 crop varieties derived from radiation-induced mutations are grown worldwide on several million hectares. If all varieties with mutants in their parentage are counted, the number reaches possibly tens of millions. The annual economic gains are measured in billions of dollars. "*

If the IAEA were to be believed, mutation plant breeding was one of the world's greatest blessings, having ameliorated an environmental crisis and elevated the lives of millions.

In the 1950s and 60s, the word "nuclear" was a stand-in for "modern." That was what made Eisenhower's "atoms for peace" initiative so brilliant. And yet it gave free rein to the proliferation—not simply of weapons—of nuclear technologies on a global scale. Whether they were the most viable solutions mattered little. The agency knew that **the key to its success was to keep the money coming in from the United States, while keeping its membership base broad.** That meant widening the tent of the nuclear world, using all the promotion strategies available.

And it still means that.

Another dispatch from Wikileaks. Skeptical of the IAEA's claims of having saved billions of dollars for the developing world through its agricultural program, in 2008 several countries attempted to shut down this aspect of the agency's work. The United States led this attempt to dismantle the program. But according to an American diplomatic cable, the Americans were stymied. These programs have **survived for decades because they have taken on a life of their own. They are symbolic of the IAEA's commitment to the developing world,** staunchly supported by the "Group of 77" (G-77), and it has become **politically impossible to eliminate them.** The survival of these programs, as one American diplomat wrote, "became a litmus test for the many developing countries that complain of U.S. and developed country efforts to play up the IAEA's 'watch dog' status at the expense of its promotional role."[15]

Does the Fukushima crisis mean the end of nuclear power and other nuclear technologies? Don't bet on it. The IAEA will promote them. Governments around the world will promote them. Today they claim it as the key to curing cancer, achieving food and water security, and solving the climate change crisis. Even if no more nuclear plants are ever again built in the United States, it doesn't make a difference. Most new nuclear activity happens outside the United States and Europe. The Americans and Europeans will continue to fund the IAEA, because they need to keep the nonproliferation watchdog around. Meanwhile, the agency will continue to knock on doors and sell nuclear solutions, whether they are needed or not.

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About John O'Sullivan

John O'Sullivan was a gifted teacher and scholar who devoted his entire academic career to Florida Atlantic University. He came to FAU in 1971 after receiving his Ph.D. from Columbia University. Since then he touched the lives of hundreds of FAU students with his brilliant and inspired teaching. An accomplished scholar, his publications included *The Draft and Its Enemies* (1974), *From Volunteerism to Conscription: Congress and the Selective Service, 1940-1945* (1982), *American Economic History* (1989), and *We Have Just Begun Not to Fight: An Oral History of Conscientious Objectors in Civilian Public Service during World War II* (co-authored with Heather Frazer, 1996). Before his death in 2000, John was working on a book project related to Medal of Honor recipients and another book project with Patricia Kollander, also an FAU faculty member, on a World War II veteran. That book was published in 2005: *I Must Be a Part of This War: One Man's Fight against Hitler and Nazism.*

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