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# Japan Crisis Could Rekindle U.S. Antinuclear Movement

By **LESLIE KAUFMAN**

In 1973, vexed by an Arab oil embargo and soaring fuel prices, President **Richard M. Nixon** championed a long-term solution: to have 1,000 nuclear reactors in place in America by the year 2000 as part of a national energy independence plan.

That never came to pass: 104 nuclear reactors operate today, compared with 40 then. The last permit for construction of what became a fully operational nuclear plant was issued in 1978.

The main obstacles to the industry's growth were huge cost overruns linked to regulatory changes, and shifts in demand for electricity, although the **Three Mile Island accident** of 1979, litigation and the 1970s and '80s antinuclear movement also played a big role.

Today, activists who figured prominently in the movement's teach-ins and protest rallies are hoping that Japan's nuclear crisis will rekindle a protest movement in the United States. Their aim, they say, is not just to block the Obama administration's push for new nuclear construction, but to convince Americans that existing plants pose dangers.

"I look at Japan and think this could very possibly be us," said the musician Graham Nash, who with the group Crosby, Stills and Nash took part in the 1979 No Nukes concerts and a rally that drew nearly a quarter of a million people to the tip of Manhattan. **James Taylor**, **Bonnie Raitt**, John Hall, Jackson Browne and **Bruce Springsteen** were also on the bill for the events, which came months after a partial core meltdown at Three Mile Island.

It was the peak of the antinuclear movement, and campaigners felt that policymakers were finally awakening to their message. "The circumstances all came together — it was like energetic waves converging, and it was pretty powerful," Mr. Nash said. "There has not been a nuclear plant built since."

Since a tsunami knocked out power at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station last week, leading to explosions and a desperate battle to cool reactors and spent fuel rods, more

Americans seem to be rethinking their position on nuclear power, said John Hall, a former member of the band Orleans who helped organize the concert and was, until recently, a congressman representing a district in upstate New York.

“I see it in e-mails, Web postings and conversations with friend and neighbors,” he said.

Paul Gunter, the director of the reactor oversight project at the advocacy group [Beyond Nuclear](#), said a [protest vigil](#) planned for Sunday at the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant could prove a test case. The reactor, whose troubles in recent years have included the collapse of a cooling tower and leaks of radioactive tritium from underground pipes, is a near twin of Unit No. 1 at the troubled Daiichi nuclear station. The State of Vermont argues that the plant is unreliable.

“Sunday will be the first indicator of the depth of the public mood,” Mr. Gunter said of the protest. Just before the earthquake and tsunami in Japan hit, the federal [Nuclear Regulatory Commission](#) voted to reject all challenges to extending the operating license of the Vermont Yankee plant.

The movement against nuclear power in this country goes back almost as far as the industry itself. The [United Auto Workers](#) opposed construction of the Fermi 1 plant outside Detroit as early as 1957. While it was eventually built, proposed plants in Queens, N.Y., and outside San Francisco were blocked by local protests in the next decade.

The movement grew in the 1970s as proposals for new plants multiplied and local opposition groups emerged. Sometimes the protests succeeded only in part. The Clamshell Alliance, for example, campaigned to block the construction of Seabrook Station in New Hampshire, part of which was eventually built and began operating. Half of the proposed plan was shelved.

Harvey Wasserman, the editor of [NukeFree.org](#), helped organized some of the protests and at one point was arrested outside the Seabrook plant. He attributes the movement’s broad appeal to its peaceful tactics.

“This is a terrible time for those of us who’ve been fighting nukes all these years,” he said of the crisis in Japan. “We’re way too familiar with the tangible toll these releases in Japan will take on the people of the area and the workers at the plant.”

Although protests continued in the United States and Europe throughout the 1980s, particularly after the [Chernobyl accident](#) in Russia in 1986, the movement may have become a victim of nuclear plant construction’s decline.

As part of his plan to rein in the greenhouse gas emissions however, **President Obama** has billed nuclear power as a clean energy alternative and enabled **loan guarantees** <http://lpo.energy.gov/> to begin flowing for new plants. Such construction also has support among many Republicans in the newly elected House, although some have moved to strip subsidies for renewable fuels like solar and wind power from the 2012 budget.

After Mr. Obama took office, some environmental groups seemed to be tipping toward cautious support for nuclear power. But that was stilled last week.

Meanwhile, some of the musicians who were central to the movement in its early days are thinking of enlisting younger performers in the campaign. "I was in contact with Bonnie about getting some new bands involved," Mr. Nash said. "We had a lot of energy back then, but it gets wearing to see the same old groups after a while."

*Matthew L. Wald contributed reporting from Washington.*