

Nuclear power is here to stay

By [David Frum](#) Marketplace, [Wednesday, March 16, 2011](#)

Countries are debating the role of nuclear power in their energy policies. So what does nuclear Energy offer?



KAI RYSSDAL: The latest try at cooling the reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant may turn out to be the simplest. Crews have almost finished running a new power line into the plant, which would give them back control over the pumps that're critical to the cooling system.

What's not simple at all is what part nuclear power should play in energy policy. Commentator David Frum sorts it out this way.

DAVID FRUM: As radioactivity leaked from Japan's damaged nuclear reactors, uranium stocks plunged on world markets. And I personally did something I never do: I bought stock on a news report. For what it's worth, let me explain one new investor's perspective on uranium.

The whole world is watching with anxiety and compassion as Japan faces the risks from radioactive emissions. Those risks are very real, and in the next hours we shall learn their measure. It's also true that a 9-plus Richter scale earthquake and tsunami represent about as extreme an event as any nuclear reactor could ever face. If the danger from this shock is contained, nuclear will have passed its most extreme test. It's like the movie "Apollo 13" -- this is either nuclear's worst disaster or finest hour.

At the same time, it is also true that the principal alternative to nuclear power is coal. And coal is an environmental catastrophe all its own. Coal changes our climate. Coal is dug from mines that collapse and kill miners. Coal ash emits more radioactivity than nuclear waste, [reports Scientific American](#). Coal burning accounts for 92 percent of smog-creating nitrogen oxide in our air, 97 percent of the fine particulates we call soot, 100 percent of the toxic mercury.

One way or another, coal is estimated to shorten between 8,000 and 34,000 lives in America every year.

The hazards of coal are less spectacular than the hazards of nuclear, in just the same way that the hazards of driving are less spectacular than the hazards of flying. Our minds seem to be wired to fear rare but spectacular hazards much more than we fear more familiar but more lethal hazards. That tendency explains bad energy policy. It does not excuse it.

RYSSDAL: David Frum was a speechwriter for the second President Bush. Today he's the editor of [Frum Forum](#). Robert Reich's up in the rotation next week. .