

The War on Radon: Few Join Up

by Kent Jeffreys

Radon is a colorless, odorless gas that is present in varying quantities across almost all land environments. It is a natural by-product of the radioactive breakdown of uranium in the earth's crust. As radon seeps through cracks and fissures it can accumulate in groundwater and even in the lower levels of man-made structures. Its potential presence in people's homes has brought radon to the attention of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The EPA has decided that radon is the number one environmental health risk in America: worse than pesticides and worse than hazardous waste. The EPA bases its conclusion on its estimates of possible deaths, about 14,000 per year, that may be caused by radon.

Judging from the panic caused by environmental scares such as Alar on apples and chemicals from hazardous waste sites, one might expect the nation's "number one risk" to incite near hysteria. Yet radon has failed to instill widespread fear in the public mind. In fact, radon appears to be fading as a general concern, at least outside environmental bureaucracies. If radon is truly our biggest threat, why haven't people panicked?

Mr. Jeffreys is a Senior Fellow in the Washington, D.C., office of the National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA), a public policy research institute based in Dallas.

Radon has several attributes that would appear to make it ideal for arousing fear.

1. *Radon can cause lung cancer.* For decades, environmentalists have successfully used fear of cancer to drive the policy debate. At extremely high levels, radon has been associated with an increased risk of lung cancer among uranium miners. Thus, radon resembles other high-dose potential carcinogens.

2. *Radon is radioactive.* Since the dropping of the first atomic bomb, radioactivity has been the stuff of science fiction, little understood but greatly feared.

3. *Radon is ubiquitous.* Since radon is found everywhere, it can accumulate in almost any home, potentially justifying a massive regulatory response.

Despite these characteristics, radon fails to rank high on the public's list of fears. This lack of concern seems to derive from several factors.

1. *Radon is natural.* Radon is not a by-product of industrial or consumer activities. Because there is no one to "blame," it has been difficult to inflame the passions of the public. Even outdoor air has some amount of radon in it.

2. *There is no subsidy for responding to radon risks.* In almost every case, the property owner must pay to reduce radon risks. There are no subsidies that allow people to give full rein to fears without bearing the consequences. Although millions of homes

and buildings have been tested and even "remediated" for radon, these actions were largely stimulated by a desire to protect property values rather than human life. In fact, many jurisdictions have mandated radon testing and/or remediation as a precondition of home sales. Remediation can cost from several hundred to several thousand dollars for the average home.

3. *Radon "victims" are smokers.* Almost all of the EPA's estimated "radon-induced" lung cancers are assumed to occur in current or former smokers. Despite the well-documented relationship of smoking to lung cancer, the EPA puts the blame on radon.

Why the EPA Goes After Radon

As with so many environmental risks, at extremely high exposure levels radon can be harmful. Much of the scientific basis for this statement comes from studies of uranium miners. Since the average home does not closely resemble a mine shaft, caution is appropriate in extrapolating from high to low doses. But the EPA assumes the risk continues down to the level of a single atom—the ultimate in low dosage. In other words, the EPA says that there is no perfectly safe radon exposure level.

Of course, there is no perfectly safe way to chew food or drive a car. Life is filled with risks, and individuals must establish some sort of response priorities or become paralyzed by even tiny risks.

It is difficult to identify which factors have most influenced the public's non-responsiveness. The fact that radon is natural is a partial explanation, since many "natural" risks are downplayed. For example, there is little or no concern over the natural pesticides in our food supply, which are present (in up to 10,000 times the quantity of man-made pesticides) in the average diet.

However, the visibility of the cost of response is also important. Lightning is

natural, for example, but everyone fears it. Since the cost of avoidance is quite small, most people respond by staying inside during thunderstorms. Costs may affect how people respond to synthetic pesticide residues as well. People express more fear about these pesticides than they do about natural pesticides. By and large, however, they aren't willing to avoid them by buying organic foods, which are more expensive and sometimes of lower aesthetic quality.

Other direct comparisons between public acceptance of or opposition to regulations can be made. For example, many people want to see local hazardous waste sites cleaned up; the cost is borne by others. In contrast, asbestos removal from schools imposes high direct costs on communities, and it is resisted. In these cases, the relative risks seem less important than who bears the cost.

The EPA's war on radon has not abated; it has only been ignored. Nevertheless, the EPA keeps trying. It has issued warnings for drinking water, schools and other public buildings, and private homes. It established a "Radon Partners" program through which it distributes grants to groups that promote radon "awareness." The EPA continues to promote short-term radon testing procedures, despite the fact that they are not very accurate or reliable.

For many potential environmental risks, the EPA behaves like a supporter of UFO theories. It's as if the EPA claimed that since there is no conclusive proof that UFOs do *not* exist, we should assume that they do! Yet in science, it can never be conclusively demonstrated that anything is impossible—even the laws of gravity could be subject to some unknown time limit and expire tomorrow. It is unscientific to present data that only support your position without adequately accounting for data that contradict your findings. Sadly, like UFO sightings, EPA cancer scares are likely to continue no matter how many times the conclusions are called into question or refuted. □

Cultural Pollution

The welfare state's destructive impacts on our economic well-being have been well chronicled by free market economists. But the inverted incentives of socialism also play havoc with the moral character of a society. All of the virtues associated with living a productive life are punished; all the vices associated with an irresponsible existence, rewarded.

The result is cultural pollution.

Market economists have long argued that environmental pollution is caused not by capitalism, but by the absence of property rights and market mechanisms. Similarly, cultural pollution is not caused by capitalism; to a large extent, it is caused by the breakdown of capitalism and the absence of markets. The discipline that comes from market relationships preserves such precious cultural resources as personal character, benevolence, and basic civility. But the welfare state has destroyed that discipline.

Those under age 30 probably can't remember a time when radio and TV stations refused to air gutter-minded "shock jocks"—or sewer-mouthed cartoon characters—or nihilistic music videos—or freak shows masquerading as "talk programs," where guests compete in revolting displays of decadence and self-abasement.

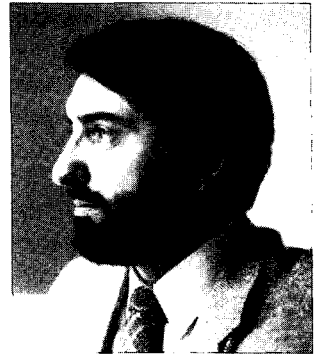
There actually was a time in this nation's not-so-distant past when most kids wouldn't use foul language around the opposite sex

(not to mention *at* adults), and when those few who did would get their faces slapped. A time when no one would have dared ask the President of the United States what kind of underwear he wore . . . and when no President would have dignified such a question with an answer.

It was a time when students referred to teachers by their surnames, teachers refused to pass kids who hadn't met minimum standards of achievement, high school graduates could read job applications, and schools issued students more books than condoms. A time when unmarried girls actually felt ashamed to get pregnant—even once—and when unemployed young men actually felt ashamed to apply for welfare. When derelicts didn't use the sidewalks, nor celebrities the airwaves, as public latrines.

During the past four decades, standards of personal taste, language, behavior, dress, and manners have plunged to loathsome levels. Today, we are awash in a cultural tsunami of vulgarity and incivility. From the street corner to the school classroom, from the movies to MTV, belligerent faces stare back at us in defiant challenge to all that is decent and good, virtuous and valuable—even simply coherent and intelligible.

What is most odious is the fact that the expressions of decadence are so incongruously militant. We behold, daily and in countless forms, bizarre spectacles of self-righteous relativism and crusading nihilism. We are simultaneously revolted and incredulous and bewildered, wondering from what



Mr. Bidinotto, a Staff Writer for Reader's Digest, is a long-time contributor to The Freeman and lecturer at FEE seminars.

Criminal Justice? The Legal System Versus Individual Responsibility, edited by Mr. Bidinotto and published by FEE, is available at \$29.95 in cloth and \$19.95 in paperback.