



## American Energy Policy: The Search for Common Ground

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Acknowledging the sharp partisan divides in United States politics today, Dan Poneman, President and CEO of Centrus Energy and Senior Fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, argued that there are, nevertheless, “opportunities for agreement” in areas related to energy policy. “We can agree on what to do even if we don’t agree on why,” he said, in a talk which focused on possible areas of agreement, and particularly on potential steps related to nuclear energy.

Poneman suggested a number of energy policies that could gain wide political agreement. Carbon capture and storage could enlist the support of both advocates of the coal industry and those concerned about climate change. Energy efficiency, with its potential for cost savings and pollution reductions, is another policy target that could potentially draw support from multiple constituencies.

Poneman even saw hope for putting a price on carbon emissions, if it could be structured so as to be revenue neutral, thus leveraging support from enthusiasts of market policies, as well as those concerned about climate change.



Poneman then turned the focus of his talk to nuclear energy, which he sees as another major area of opportunity for common ground on policy, noting that nuclear energy is simultaneously a source of carbon-free electricity and good-paying jobs, while supporting U.S. national security and nonproliferation goals.

Poneman acknowledged some major challenges for nuclear energy in the United States, including addressing concerns over cost, waste, safety, and security. While the United States still has the largest commercial nuclear power fleet, as of October 2017, only eight of the over 50 nuclear power plants currently under construction worldwide are U.S. designs (Poneman notes that since his talk, with the cancellation of under-construction reactors in South Carolina, the number has dropped to six).

Similarly, Poneman observed, a dozen countries have surpassed the U.S. in domestic uranium enrichment capacity. In 1981, the U.S. supplied all its own uranium needs. As of 2015, however, the U.S. imported 91% of its uranium, and 68% of its enriched uranium. While uranium enrichment technology has clear national security implications since it can be used to fuel nuclear weapons, this growing uranium import dependence has largely escaped public notice, much less concern. By contrast, when the 1973 oil crisis increased U.S. dependence on imported oil from 27% to 35%, it was deemed a national security imperative to tackle by presidents of both parties in the decades that followed. According to Poneman, America’s “longstanding U.S. global leadership [in nuclear energy technology] stands at serious risk” and he argued for urgent actions to reverse that trend.

Does this decline in the U.S. trade position in nuclear energy have to be permanent? Not necessarily, Poneman said. With a possible transition to advanced nuclear reactors and fuels, Poneman suggested that there is an opportunity to “reclaim U.S. global leadership.”

Poneman spoke as part of the Kennedy School’s Energy Policy Seminar Series, which is sponsored by the Consortium for Energy Policy Research of the Mossavar-Rahmani Center on Business and Government.