



Executives from Tokyo Electric
Corporation

Until today, I had been impressed by what I took to be the Japanese government's candor about the unfolding nuclear crisis. Some of the statements from officials seemed surprisingly frank, with [admissions](#) from the Prime Minister on Monday, for example, that a "very high risk" of "further leakage" of radiation was possible. Tokyo Electric Power officials have also struck me as being quite forthcoming, [admitting](#) that the odds of further hydrogen explosions were likely, that spent fuel rods were boiling off water and so forth.

But today, the U.S. government is separating itself from the Japanese government, with the Chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission [recommending](#) a much broader evacuation zone than the Japanese have suggested. Even more troubling is the NRC's [conclusion](#) that spent fuel rods are no longer covered in any water, leading to releases of radiation at extremely high levels. The Japanese firmly reject the NRC's assertion about the fuel rods.

If — as seems likely — the more dire conclusions and recommendations of the US turn out to be accurate, the Japanese government will have lost what it most needs right now: credibility. What quicker way to create panic among its citizenry than to have its citizens no longer believe its communications, including the government's pleas to remain calm? And obfuscation can even prolong the crisis, with misinformation preventing experts from weighing in on how to solve the problem. Wasn't that one of the signature lessons of the Russian government's handling of Chernobyl?

I'm reminded a bit of the Obama Administration's efforts in the early days of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill to seriously understate the rate of leakage of oil even in the face of independent and credible expert conclusions that the spill was far larger than either the government or BP wanted to admit. After investigating the response to the oil spill, the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Drilling and Oil Spill [blasted](#) the administration for its lack of candor and explained in very clear terms that the consequences of lack of candor go far beyond a PR disaster. To quote the Commission's staff:

The absence of trust fuels public fears, and those fears in turn can cause major harm, whether because the public loses confidence in the federal government's assurances that beaches or seafood are safe, or because the government's lack of credibility makes it harder to build relationships with state and local officials, as well as community leaders, that are necessary for effective response actions.

One could easily substitute a few words and make the same claims about the Japanese government's handling of the nuclear crisis if the US version turns out to be the correct one.

So why do governments engage in obfuscation in the case of a major environmental crisis? Is it because they fear that the political fallout from a disaster is likely to increase with the size of the calamity and therefore wishful thinking leads them to underestimate the harm? I honestly don't get it. Candor breeds trust, something badly needed during an emergency. And yet governments seem incapable of learning that lesson.