

[Ann wants to know](#), “why do governments engage in obfuscation in the case of a major environmental crisis?” The assumption here is that the public is going to find out eventually, so why cover it up now and make it worse? Well, here’s a theory.

Note that “governments” don’t do anything — people do. “Government” is something of a reification; the only potential actors are, of course, people. And that changes the incentives somewhat.

If I’m the person in charge of a particular problem and there is an environmental disaster coming down the pike, my incentives are quite different from the government’s. Suppose that there is an 80% chance of disaster (say, fuel-rod meltdown) occurring. If that happens, everyone is in trouble, but me especially, because it’s my responsibility. It’s better for me to take the risk on the 20% happening, because if the 80% happens, I’m toast anyway. I don’t care about “the government’s” long run credibility because I won’t be in the government over the long run.

We can make an analogy somewhat to the CEO of a flailing corporation. It’s not in *the corporation’s* interest for me to bet company money on risky investments, because that reduces corporate value. But it’s very much in *my* interest: if it doesn’t work, I was going to be sacked anyway, but if it does work out, then I might save my job. My theory is that similar dynamics are at work here.

So the problem here isn’t “the government.” It’s those pesky “people” who are running it. But unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), we really don’t have any other choice.