Jonathan argues, essentially, that governments don't lie, people do, because the incentive structure for the person responsible for the catastrophe favors taking the risk that the better outcome will occur even if it's unlikely. This is especially true, in Jonathan's view, because if the terrible outcome occurs, the person in charge will be ousted and so lacks the long term incentive to act in the government's long term interest. I disagree. First, Jonathan's account is just too cynical for me. I think that most government folks in charge of a catastrophe — the Prime Minister or President and his advisors — honestly want to handle a crisis in a way that minimizes harm to the broader population (private actors within Tokyo Electric are a different matter). It's hard to imagine a leader saying to himself, "well, I won't be around anyway so I might as well discount the likelihood of harm in the hopes that the catastrophe isn't so bad because that will help me if I'm right." Instead, I think there has to be some kind of psychological tendency to wish away the worst outcomes even in the face of evidence to the contrary without really thinking through the consequences of losing credibility with the populace. But even if Jonathan's cynical view is right, his analysis about incentives is in my view just wrong. Governments who behave openly and honestly in the face of a crisis can gain political strength. Governments who obfuscate and downplay risk — especially when the truth is very likely to come out — emerge weaker. Really, do you think Prime Minister Naoto Kan gains by obfuscating? So the incentives ought to be the opposite of what Jonathan posits.

One update about the divide between the U.S. and Japan over how large the evacuation zone ought to be. The New York Times is reporting that U.S. radiation tests show that radiation levels are not elevated outside of the Japanese Government's evacuation zone recommendation of 18 miles but that the U.S. is continuing to recommend evacuations within a 50 mile radius. Though there's plenty of support for extending the zone in case the situation worsens, the data provide some support for the Japanese position.