Historical perspectives on geologic disposal

For the 2009 Advanced Summer School of Radioactive Waste Disposal with Social-Scientific Literacy

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Pop Quiz! History
What could history be good for?
Thoughts in relation to geologic disposal

(Preface: What are historians trying to do anyways?)

3 sorts of things history could deliver for you
(assuming you want them):

1) concrete info, useful as background for the present
   specifically drawn from the history of disposal efforts

2) comparison cases to think with, and some generalizations
   of mid-range generality, drawn from the history of technology

3) analytical approaches / intellectual strategies
   most generally drawn from history "at large"
Payoff 1: Concrete background info

- How certain constellations got set up ➔ what might be sensible ways of acting in them today
  - NWPA of 1987 (and local reactions more generally)
  - WIPP characterization rules
- How particular technical choices were settled on
  - arguments over host rock for a repository
- Counter to the nostalgia for the “golden age” of technical rationality
  - NAS reports of the 1950s and 1960s
- Lability and the conditions for sudden reversals
  - Asse
Payoff 2:
Comparison cases and generalizations

- Can technological things ever be sensibly separated from social things?
- Can how technologies evolve ever be understood without referring to what else is happening at the time?
- Have purely technical solutions ever worked? (Or, at least, have they worked recently?)
- How have non-technical audiences reacted to scientists' and engineers’ stories of technical progress?

Payoff 3:
Analytical approaches / intellectual strategies

- Practice some techniques of social science research
  - listening, listening, listening
  - reading between the lines
- Experiment on your own attitudes toward differing views
  - "For or against" vs. strategic learning
  - Suspend belief in the "one best way"
- Try cultivating a taste for contingency and complexity; it can give you a unique kind of nimbleness
- Play with the idea that the future can’t be framed into existence, but always holds surprises
- Pay attention to how historical stories get constructed
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