

June 21, 2006

BOOKS OF THE TIMES | 'BIG COAL'

The Promise and Problems of Those Dirty Black Rocks

By [WILLIAM GRIMES](#)

With oil prices soaring and the Middle East in turmoil, it may be some comfort to know that the United States is sitting on gargantuan reserves of fossil fuel. That's the good news. The bad news is that it's coal.

Just how bad is laid out emphatically in "Big Coal," Jeff Goodell's compelling indictment of one of the country's biggest, most powerful and most antiquated industries. Coal, he argues, is bad for the economy, bad for public health and especially bad for the environment, yet its future looks quite bright. It is relatively cheap. It is plentiful. And Americans, who get half their electric power from coal-burning generators, are addicted to it. As of 2005, more than 120 new coal-burning plants were either planned or under construction in the United States.

"We may not like to admit it," Mr. Goodell writes, "but our shiny white iPod economy is propped up by dirty black rocks."

Mr. Goodell, a contributing editor at Rolling Stone, considers coal at three points in its life cycle. He travels to West Virginia and Wyoming to see how it is mined and transported by rail to generating plants around the country. He watches it being burned and transformed into electricity. Finally, he weighs the environmental effects of releasing huge amounts of sulfur and carbon dioxide into the atmosphere from the more than one billion tons of coal burned every year in the United States, and billions more around the world. Seen from any angle, coal looks ugly.

There is a price to pay for cheap electricity. In places like New York, San Francisco and Boston, the hidden costs remain hidden. But Mr. Goodell heads out to towns like Madison, W. Va., where companies now go after coal by blasting the tops off mountains and dumping them into rivers and valleys. Deforestation has led to devastating freak floods. The mountaintop debris, which leaches acid and heavy metals into streams, was helpfully upgraded from "waste" to "fill" by the current Bush administration, removing a big legal obstacle to new mining operations.

Mr. Goodell retraces, vividly and concisely, the sorry history of West Virginia coal mining, now

in its twilight era. The big mining companies, after squeezing the easy money out of the state, have moved to the Powder River Basin in Wyoming, where low-sulfur coal can be strip-mined, and the industry is booming. Meanwhile, back in old-coal country, nonunion subcontractors cut corners and push workers to the limit to scratch out a few more tons of fuel from nearly depleted mines.

Coal mining in the United States, Mr. Goodell argues, is a greedy, dirty business with an appalling record on worker safety and environmental pollution. A 19th-century industry, it has faced the challenges of the 21st century largely by digging in its heels and looking resolutely backward. Its chief enablers have been pliant politicians, softened up with lots of money, and an often craven regulatory bureaucracy. This Bush administration in particular has gone out of its way to make life comfortable for big coal, and Mr. Goodell, citing chapter and verse, takes it to task effectively.

Mr. Goodell waxes wroth on [global warming](#). Big coal, faced with mounting evidence that carbon dioxide emissions have contributed hugely to increases in planetary temperatures, resolutely decided to shoot the messengers. Rather than looking at cleaner technology, companies have concentrated on discrediting the science behind global warming, forming the Information Council on the Environment to label global warming a theory rather than a fact. An industry-financed video, "The Greening of Planet Earth," suggests that warmer temperatures will lead to unprecedented abundance, as deserts turn into lush farmland. Unbelievably, this campaign has proved to be highly effective.

Mr. Goodell hits hard but fights fair, for the most part. He concedes that big coal has made some progress over the years. He wants to see it make more, especially by embracing a new technology called integrated gasification combined cycle, which cooks off the impurities in coal before turning it into a synthetic gas that is then captured and burned in a turbine. Generators using this method can burn coal nearly as cleanly as natural gas, but the process is more expensive. And this is where the rubber meets the road.

Are Americans willing to pay 20 to 25 percent more to turn on a light or cool their homes? Here the hardheaded Mr. Goodell goes a little soft. Essentially, he is asking average consumers to dig deeper and pay more now for vaguely perceived future benefits. Present pain for future gain does not usually add up to a winning political selling point, so to get it across, Mr. Goodell makes wild promises. A total commitment to clean energy could, he argues, "unleash a jobs bonanza that would make what happened in Silicon Valley in the 1990's look like a bake sale." How this will come about remains a little mysterious. It just will.

Mr. Goodell should simply admit that there's no free lunch. The United States has enjoyed a

free energy ride for a century and more, and the coal companies have made out like bandits all along the way. Now the day of reckoning has come. We — and, in a just world, they — are going to pay a price, either today or tomorrow. Mr. Goodell, in this well-written, timely and powerful book, makes it crystal clear what the stakes are.

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