

THE FALSE PROMISE OF CLEAN COAL

JEFF GOODELL



post carbon institute

ABOUT THE AUTHOR


A longtime contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*, JEFF GOODELL has written for many periodicals. His books include *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret Behind America's Energy Future* and *How to Cool the Planet: Geoengineering and the Audacious Quest to Fix Earth's Climate*.



This publication is an excerpted chapter from *The Energy Reader: Overdevelopment and the Delusion of Endless Growth*, Tom Butler, Daniel Lerch, and George Wuerthner, eds. (Healdsburg, CA: Watershed Media, 2012). *The Energy Reader* is copyright © 2012 by the Foundation for Deep Ecology, and published in collaboration with Watershed Media and Post Carbon Institute.

For other excerpts, permission to reprint, and purchasing visit energy-reality.org or contact Post Carbon Institute.

Photo: George Wuerthner. *Coal-fired power plant near Kemmerer, Wyoming.*



The coal industry's slick advertisements promoting “clean coal” employ twenty-first century media techniques to keep us locked into a nineteenth century energy economy. A classic greenwashing campaign, it uses the iconography of sexy technology and down-home Americana to maintain the status quo: Big Coal's influence over energy politics.

Several years ago, in Gillette, Wyoming, I fell into a long conversation with the vice president of a large American coal company about coal's public image problem. Gillette is in the center of the Powder River Basin, the epicenter of the coal boom in America, where 60-foot seams of coal lay just below the surface. This vice president, who did not want his name to appear in print, was deeply concerned about coal's future and expressed frustration with environmental attacks on coal, suggesting that it was all a problem of perception: “People don't like coal because it's black,” he told me. “If it were white, all our problems would be solved.”

Whenever one of those slick ads for “clean coal” pops up on CNN, I think about that conversation in Gillette. The 35-million-dollar “clean coal” campaign, spearheaded by a coal industry front group called American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity (formerly known as Americans for Balanced Energy Choices), is nothing less than a nationwide effort to paint coal white.

And to the coal industry's credit, they're doing a pretty good job. Republicans and Democrats alike tout “clean coal” as the solution to America's energy troubles. The logic is simple: America has lots of coal. We are a technologically advanced society. Ergo, we can clean up coal. What's the problem?

Well, here's one: “Clean coal” is not an actual invention,

a physical thing—it is an advertising slogan. Like “fat-free donuts” or “interest-free loans,” “clean coal” is a phrase that embodies the faith that there is an easy answer for every hard question in America today. We can have wars without sacrifice. We can borrow more than we can afford without worrying about how we'll pay it back. We can end our dependency on oil by powering our SUVs with ethanol made from corn. And we can keep the lights on without superheating the climate through the magic of “clean coal.”

Mining and burning coal remains one of the most destructive things human beings do on this Earth. It destroys mountains, poisons water, pollutes the air, and warms the atmosphere. True, if you look strictly at emissions of smog-producing chemicals like sulfur dioxide, new coal plants are cleaner than the old coal burners of yore. But going from four bottles of whiskey a week down to three does not make you clean and sober.

Of course, the “clean coal” campaign is not about reality—it's about perception. It's an exercise in rebranding. Madison Avenue did it for Harley Davidson motorcycles and Converse shoes. Why not Old King Coal? It's not a difficult trick—just whip out some slick ads with upbeat music and lots of cool twenty-first-century technology like fighter jets and computers. Run the ads long enough, and people will believe.

But the real goal of the campaign is not simply to rebrand coal as a clean and modern fuel—it's to convince energy-illiterate TV viewers that the American way of life depends on coal. The ads remind us (accurately) that half the electricity in America comes from coal, then they show images of little girls getting tucked into bed at night or Little Leaguers playing ball under the lights.

The subtext is not simply that, without the electricity from coal, the lights will go out and your family will be plunged into darkness. It's that, without coal, civilization as we know it will come to an end. As one utility industry executive asked me while I was reporting my book *Big Coal*, "Have you ever been in a blackout? Do you remember how scary it was?"

From the coal industry's point of view, this is a brilliant way to frame the argument. If the choice is between coal or chaos, they win. This framing also disarms environmental arguments—yes, it's too bad that mountaintop-removal mining has destroyed or polluted 1,200 miles of streams in Appalachia and that the Environmental Protection Agency projects a loss of more than 1.4 million acres—an area the size of Delaware—by the end of the decade.

But hey, if it's a choice between flattening West Virginia and keeping our lights on, good-bye West Virginia! That's a false choice, of course.

The coal industry may not want to acknowledge it, but we're living in the twenty-first century now. We have indeed figured out other ways to generate electricity besides burning 30-million-year-old rocks. And with each passing year, those alternatives are getting cheaper and smarter.

Wind is already less expensive than coal in many parts of the country, and so is large-scale solar thermal. Solar PV costs are plunging. Google is exploring enhanced geothermal. The creaky old electricity grid will soon morph into a system that looks more like the Internet, driving big gains in efficiency and allowing for real-time pricing of a kilowatt of power.

This does not mean we can shut down every coal plant tomorrow. But it does mean that coal is no longer the engine of civilized life as it has been since the Industrial Revolution.

Big Coal is best understood as a beast of inertia, pushed along by hundreds of billions of dollars worth of heavy metal infrastructure, and kept on track by an army of lobbyists, and our own ignorance of what goes on behind the light switch.

That may be changing. Even seven-year-olds know that the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, especially carbon dioxide, is warming the planet. Coal is by far the most carbon-intensive of fossil fuels, and currently in the United States there is no financial cost to dumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Big Coal will vigorously fight any legislation that actually puts a serious price on carbon dioxide, because once that market signal is put in place, coal's reign as a "cheap" energy source is officially over.

Big Coal insists they have the solution. It's called "carbon capture and storage." In most scenarios, capturing and storing carbon dioxide from coal involves building a new kind of power plant that uses heat and pressure to gasify the coal, instead of burning it directly. In these new plants, the carbon dioxide can be removed and then injected underground in abandoned gas and oil wells or deep saline aquifers.

Big Coal would like us all to believe that capturing and storing carbon dioxide from these new coal plants is a slam-dunk technology—but one that's not quite ready for prime time yet (capturing these emissions from existing combustion coal plants, while theoretically possible, is far too expensive and inefficient to be taken seriously by anyone but the most die-hard coal boosters).

Of course, Big Coal has always been better at touting new technology than actually deploying it. Yes, there are serious questions about how much it will cost to build new coal plants that can capture and store carbon dioxide, how soon it will happen, and whether or not the technology can scale up quickly enough to really

make a difference. But it's not just technology that's holding back carbon capture and storage. It's politics. Without a price on carbon, there is little incentive to do anything serious about carbon dioxide emissions from coal plants.

Meanwhile, the need to reduce emissions grows more urgent every year. As NASA climatologist James Hansen has repeatedly pointed out, continuing to burn coal the old-fashioned way is a sure-fire way to melt Greenland and turn Miami into an aquarium.

In the end, the "clean coal" campaign is about using the tools of the twenty-first century to keep us locked in the nineteenth century. Like other greenwashing campaigns, it's about using the iconography of sexy technology and down-home Americana to maintain the status quo.

These campaigns always pretend to offer inspiration about what we can do in America if we set our minds and hearts to it, but in fact the real message is what we *can't* do: We can't power America without coal, and we can't pass meaningful carbon legislation without wrecking the American economy.

This is why the false promise of "clean coal" is dangerous. The goal is not to solve our problems, but to perpetuate our addiction. In one ad, the narrator even adopts the feel-good language of substance abuse and recovery: Cleaning up coal is a "big challenge," he explains. "But we've made a commitment—a commitment to clean."

After decades of stoking the engines of denial and obfuscation on global warming, it's nice that Big Coal wants to be a good citizen. But just because your pusher decides to shower and shave, don't delude yourself into thinking that he cares about your welfare.

His real goal is to keep you hooked.