

FEATURE

A Fine Texas Wind

By [William Murchison](#) from the [March 2010](#) issue

When federal regulators and environmentalist deep thinkers come down, or propose to, on the energy industry, Texans take it kind of personal-like, having been in this energy game a long time. How long? A century and more: easily long enough to understand the trade-offs that energy use and development can impose on the spickest-and-spannest, most immaculately fingered cultures.

Oil, you might have heard, is black and greasy. Stains the clothes. Smells. Yuck.

Consider Beaumont, Texas, in March, 1901. For nearly two months, huge plumes of oil from wells in the Spindletop field had inundated surrounding land, forming literal lakes of the black, greasy stuff. One day, according to the authors of a 1952 account, James A. Clark and Michel T. Halbouty, "A switch engine belched out a blast of coal cinders that fell into the grass on the west edge of the hill, igniting a small fire. A narrow rivulet of oil...was ignited like a fuse....Minutes later the [oil] lake was afire with towering flames leaping toward a column of black smoke. The smoke reached a low-hanging layer of stratus clouds and gradually spread over an ever widening area, enveloping the countryside in nocturnal darkness...The climax came when...two walls of fire met with an impact that shook the countryside. As this happened, streaks of fire shot up through the low-hanging clouds and then rained down."

Gosh. What righteous fury did the Environmental Protection Agency visit on Texas for this disaster? Ah, wait -- it would be three-quarters of a century before the EPA emerged to assert tentative control over the unruly consequences of energy development; long, long stretches of time before the development of fuel resources came to seem, in many eyes, less a public good than a malignancy.

Meanwhile Texas put the Spindletop mess in order, devised increasingly useful (albeit hardly infallible plans) for containing pollution and disaster, drilled thousands more oil and gas wells, built sprawling refineries, and constructed the means of moving the refineries' products throughout the country and the world. At some cost to the state and its rural way life; at some profit as well, in terms of jobs and bank accounts.

The current calumnification of oil companies ("Big Oil") and the products they bring to market (gasoline, electricity, plastics, etc.) puzzles and infuriates the generality of Texans. The state that long ago, as to energy, worked out some constructive balance between economic and cultural imperatives finds out-of-state power elites declaring, hold it, won't do, the Age of Carbon has to end right now, got that?

The long-running health care foofaraw has obscured the seriousness of the Obama administration's assault and battery attempt against the producers and consumers of traditional energy; obscured not just the premises of the attempt but also its predictable consequences, such as the depletion of prosperity and of the human spirit. The state of Texas, where the fuel oil age was born in 1901 with the discovery of Spindletop, offers a vantage point for consideration of the stakes in our raucous exchanges over "clean" fuels and global warming.

The Obama administration and its congressional allies don't like carbon fuel, nor do they seem to care much for those who produce it with an expertise beyond the comprehension of the unlettered crews that developed the Spindletop field. The American Clean Energy and Security (ACES) Act of 2009 -- known as Waxman-Markey and already passed by the House -- proposes a cap-and-trade system for reducing pollution and, concomitantly, the use of carbon-based fuels. Refiners would receive just 2.25 percent of government allowances to "pollute" -- a paltry offset, as the bill blames them for 44 percent of the country's emissions. (That's 4 percent at the refinery level, 40 percent from automobiles, planes, and like dispensers of evil carbons.) The House's idea: drive up carbon costs, make consumers switch from pickup trucks to electric cars, start relying on renewables such as wind and the sun.

The EPA meanwhile is industriously (so to speak) laying into Detroit, or what's left of it, by proposing a requirement that fleets of new cars average 35.5 miles per gallon by 2016 and by tailoring national limits on vehicle tailpipe emissions of greenhouse gases. That'll learn 'em, durn 'em, those countrymen of ours who persist in the mythological claim of entitlement to go where they want, when they want.

Could any of this have been foretold, back at the beginning of the fuel oil era -- back at Spindletop? Barely. The Christian ministers of Beaumont in 1901 were intent that no more calamities like the March blaze should take place, lest great fires under the ground should cause the country's collapse or a more uncontrolled flow (Clark and Halbouty again) "submerge the entire coast under a sea of oil which would ignite and destroy all living beings." Well. Anyway. Fear and apprehension came under control eventually. There was, in all human affairs and affrays, good along with bad. The great state of Texas learned to cultivate both possibilities, holding them together in tension.

The good was better wages, better conditions of life, economic development; the bad was danger and the prospect of despoliation. You had to make them work together somehow. There was, in human-economic terms, no earthly Paradise at the end of the highway paved with oil dollars; but, then, there was no Sheol either. Anyway not until the climate-obsessives of the Democratic Party grabbed hold of the political throttle. Then balancing and trade-offs ceased. Carbon, once good, was bad. So it remains in many exalted circles.

There is no special point in holding up Texas as unique victim of the energy wars, but two considerations are of note: 1) Texas stands nervously in the gun sights of the climate-obsessives; and 2) in Texas marketplace incentives conspire with common sense to address generally perceived problems that have arisen with respect to energy.

The benefit of penalizing and piling on one of the country's most prosperous states, home to more Fortune 500 companies than any other state, New York included, is less than transparent. ACES is designed as a whack on the head for conventional energy usage. "The only way to do this," says Texas government's top financial officer (the Comptroller of Public Accounts), Susan Combs, "is through cap and trade and tighter controls on emissions." Energy-producing, energy-consuming Texas will just have to pay. "My office," says Combs, "looked at a reasonable prediction of future energy prices under ACES performed by the Charles River Associates for the National Black Chamber of Commerce. Our analysis indicates Texas" -- where 70 percent of all new U. S. jobs have been created since 2008 -- "could lose 170,000 to 425,000 jobs by 2020." Combs says cap-and-trade would increase the average Texas family's living costs -- food, diapers, plastics, cell phones, health care, housing -- by \$1,136 a year. That, with no guarantee of the glaciers' firming up at last while other deplorable consequences of "global warming" recede from view. How nice for the national economy as well, which depends on big states to haul much of the freight, in taxes and the like, for the smaller, less-populous states. Is it really necessary to precipitate job loss in order to carry out, on highly speculative terms, a cleanup of the air?

Is it necessary, equally to the point, when the job may be going forward in less destructive ways?

Climate-obsessives apparently ascribe to non-obsessives a fine indifference to the finer things of life, including life itself. This is in part because the non-obsessives operate at a different level of discourse. They don't propose the creation of regimes resting on regulation and control. They assume certain meliorative effects that come with the application of common sense and marketplace incentives. It will be observed that neither of these commodities enjoys much standing with members of the Obama-Pelosi-Reid regime, who prefer arm-twisting to conciliation, or even informed argument.

Texans, in other words, would have to be loopy not to understand that energy production and provision don't make harsher demands than in the old days when we filled up our Chevys with 29-cent regular and dropped our thermostats to 68 in the summer. That ole dog, as we say, won't hunt: not with the big oil fields, such as East Texas, all gone now.

A kind of encomium to Texas came in, of all places, a *New York Times* analysis last fall: Texas and California as "policy laboratories" for clean, renewable energy. Texas, wrote Kate Galbraith, "has...emerged as the nation's top producer or a commodity prized by environmentalists: wind power. Eager developers are covering its desolate western mesas with giant turbines." (They ain't much to look at, I can tell you, lady, but they sure beat up a whole lot of energy!)

"The world's largest wind farm began operations in Texas [in October 2009], and the state now has close to three times as much wind capacity as Iowa, the second-ranked state....Texas' secret, besides strong winds and lots of land, is its lack of regulation. Wind developers rave about the fact that, in essence, they need few state permits to build a turbine farm." Indeed, the state's renewable energy requirement dates back a whole decade to (how do you like it, Miz Pelosi?) the governorship of George W. Bush. In 2008, those good ole gasoline-sloshing Texans got 5 percent of their energy from wind. Yee-haw.

From a different ideological quarter, that of *Investor's Business Daily*, comes the sound of more clapping hands: "California should copy Texas" -- by easing central planning requirements, encouraging enterprise, and dialing down some of the grosser environmental enthusiasms, such as saving "obscure species of fish" at the cost of drying up once-fertile agricultural land.

Coal? You want clean coal? Kathleen Hartnett White, who runs the natural resources shop at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, writes that "New coal plants equipped with cutting-edge technology, and retrofits of existing plants, have contributed to major improvement in the air quality of Texas and other regions." A dozen clean-coal demonstration projects are under way in the state. A good thing, too, not least because Texas is the nation's heaviest user of coal. White gets excited by the prospect of an oil-recovery technique -- carbon capture and storage -- as coming into use for nabbing CO2 from coal-fire generation and either using it commercially or storing vast amounts of it underneath the state's coastal waters or in its brine deposits.

The big stink and stir over carbon is great fun, possibly, for the policy chieftains in Washington who imagine, possibly, they and their ideas might languish forever in university seminar rooms and on daily blogs. And yet the fun ignores reality. You don't generally, in the Washington, D.C.-California manner, have to kick and pummel people to make them do economically sound things. It helps sometimes just to encourage them.

Nor is it useful to kick around those on whose success rests the success of the larger community. Texans don't require successions of back thumps from politicians (a class they tend not to admire unduly). Some respectful conversation would do as well. When-if-Capitol Hill returns to "climate change" and fuel efficiency, there will be immense value in poking around to see what the pros are up to, and what their experience suggests others might do in imitation. Of course that would suggest the need for some ventures in unprecedented modesty at high executive levels, some backtracking from advanced postures of certainty.

Ummm-hmmm. We'll see about all that.

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