

## An Open Letter to America's Coal Miners, and to America

By Mark Sumner

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To the miner let me say that he stands where the farmer does—the work of the world waits on him. If he slackens or fails, armies and statesmen are helpless. — *Woodrow Wilson*



I worked in coal mining for 32 years. I won't go so far as to call myself a miner, because only a fraction of that was spent actually loading explosives in a surface mine, or working construction underground. Most of my time I was that other thing, a "company man."

But I know. I know how being a miner is unlike any other job.

What you're going to do today (and tomorrow, and the day after) is dirty, difficult, and above all dangerous. The men riding down beside you on the lift aren't just co-workers. Your life depends on them. The guy running the roof bolter is literally responsible for keeping the sky from falling. The electricians are running cables carrying not 120 volts, but thousands of volts, in a place where every spark is a threat. Every person driving a mantrip or scoop is whipping around in the dark, making dozens of blind, 90 degree turns. Even the lowliest newbie in the mine is building block walls and hanging curtains that help the ventilation fans sweep away accumulations of explosive gas and drive fresh air to where you work.

In the surface mines, you're dealing with amounts of explosives that would make most armies shake in their combat boots. You're driving trucks that carry 100, 200, 400 tons of crushed rock or coal in a single trip—trucks so big you reach the cab along stairways that double-back

multiple times. Trucks so big they can run over a pickup and never notice the bump. Trucks so big that you can't see a man on the ground unless he's a football field away. Then you're driving those trucks next to 200' drops while other guys in 'dozers and smaller vehicles scramble to avoid impossibly huge tires.

From the continuous miner operator to the belt walker, the top dogs in the dragline to the water truck driver, every single worker in a vast machine that may be spread out over 100 square miles of surface, or nested dozens of miles underground, is utterly vital and intimately connected.

But the reason miners are so passionate about their job goes beyond just that close bond with fellow miners. It's that thing at the top of the article. That "work of the world waits on him" bit. There are songs about how "coal keeps the lights on." There's a romance that wanders through "16 tons" and past a lot of coal miner's daughters. From the stickers on the hardhats to the banners in the mine parking lot, miners are reminded every day that what they are doing is important, vital to the nation. They are still Wilson's "great service army."

They're not just risking their lives. They're risking them for you, America. Only ... that's no longer true. And I'm sorry. Really sorry. But it's not.

For the miner, even the suggestion that there is something wrong with mining isn't an attack on an industry. It's an attack on their worth, and on the worth of the people they've both supported and depended on every day. It's an attack on their values. On their family.

It's an insult to their best friend. A slur against their fathers. You know what the answer to "why don't they just get up and move to some other place" is? It starts with an "F" and ends with "you."

But miners, here's the thing. The awful, awful thing. You're being lied to. You're being used as props in a war that's not just bad for the nation, it's bad for you and your families. You're being sold a bill of goods, and and really, I think you know that.

This is the hard truth. In 2000, coal generated almost 53 percent of all the electricity in the United States. By 2009, that was 45 percent. In 2014 it was 39 percent. One year later, it was 33 percent.

Look at that last number. Coal's contribution to the electrical picture dropped by 6 percent *in a single year*. That didn't happen because of rules on carbon pollution that were never even made. It didn't happen because of regulations on water pollution that never went into effect.

It happened because fracking for natural gas has made that fuel extremely abundant, and generators of electricity would much, *much* rather deal with gas than coal. Even when the gas itself is more expensive than coal, gas is easier to transport, easier to store, easier to burn. You don't need expensive ash-removal on the smokestacks of a gas-powered plant, because gas doesn't make ash. You don't need to worry about where to bury ton after ton of clinkers left over when the coal is burned. There are no dams full of slurry to burst.

Better still, from the point of view of the people making electricity, gas generators are cheaper. You can buy them small and add on power gradually. Coal plants are big. They take a huge amount of money up front and don't start making money for decades after construction.

That's why there are no new coal plants under construction anywhere in the United States. None.

Forget the songs. Ignore the banners. You don't sell coal to "America." You sell it to Duke Energy, and Southern Company, and NRG and a few dozen others. That's who buys coal. Only they're buying less. And they're going to keep buying less, until they're buying none at all. Donald Trump isn't going to change that. Short of passing a law that requires power companies to burn coal, which he won't, there's nothing that can stop it.

If Congress repealed every environmental law and every safety law that affects coal mining tonight, you know what would happen tomorrow? There would be fewer coal jobs. And fewer still the day after.

In fact, the regulations that Trump is repealing will make that happen *faster*. The rule that was changed on allowing more coal waste in streams won't make new coal jobs. It will allow mining companies to replace underground mines with mountaintop removal mines. Those mines use far fewer people. When Trump signed that document and handed you the pen, what he was repealing was coal jobs.

I know it's hard. I know it hurts. I know you're suffering blows to your pocketbook and your pride, while at the same time seeing those same disasters play out over and over in the lives of your friends. Those guys who kept the sky from falling, some of them are now having a hard time keeping roofs over their own children. That's a genuine tragedy.

But it's not a tragedy caused by President Obama, no matter how many times mine owners blamed him. It's not a tragedy caused by people concerned about global warming, no matter how good a target they might make. It just ... is.

It's a tragedy due to the replacement of coal in the marketplace, and the replacement of miners by automated systems. Trust me on that last part, because I spent a dozen years implementing and perfecting systems that make mines more efficient expressly so they can get by with fewer trucks, fewer dozers, and fewer coal miners.

Coal mining jobs are not coming back. They can't, and I'm sorry. That feeling of camaraderie, and that knowledge that you are at the center of something important—the secret heroes of America, struggling in the dark to make life easier for everyone. It's ending. Right now, in your lifetime. It won't die overnight, but next year there will be fewer miners. Fewer still the year after that.

It's been a long, long time in the happening. There were nearly 700,000 miners when Wilson gave his speech in 1919. There were 450,000 when World War II began. There were fewer than 200,000 when Eisenhower took office. By 2000, that number was down to about 70,000. And it keeps falling. Coal will never again be the industry your fathers knew, or that you knew in your youth.

The best thing you can do now is to stop letting yourself be used as props in a game that's actually harming you, your families, and your communities. Stop believing the politicians, like Donald Trump, who are telling you sweet, sweet lies. Stop believing the mine owners who count on your loyalty simply to give their own wallets a last big bonus.

You're going to have to do something else, and there are people, both in politics and elsewhere, who care about you and wish you, your families, and your communities the best. Work with them to find alternatives that preserve your lives and your dignity.

I once made a trip to a whaling museum. I went thinking about an industry that seemed both controversial and cruel. But what I found was men who put their lives in one another's hands for weeks and months on end. Men who risked everything to bring back a fuel America needed. Men who kept the lights on. Men whose communities still celebrate their lives, their heroism, their sacrifice a hundred years after the last ship left New Bedford.

I've also been in mining museums in a dozen small towns across America. Whether in Eastern Kentucky or on the plains of the Powder River Basin, there are people gathering up the equipment. Assembling the photographs. Recording the stories.

You will not be forgotten. The sacrifice and the danger, the songs and the tradition. They won't be lost. You really did keep the lights on. We love you for it. But the jobs, and the future of coal mining, are a vanishing thing. Please, for your own sake and that of your nation, do the hardest thing ever—anything else.