'War on Coal' Label Obscures Battlefield Realities

VICKI SMITH,Associated Press

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (AP) — Drive through the coalfields of Central Appalachia, and signs of the siege are everywhere.

Highway billboards announce entry to "Obama's No Job Zone," while decals on pickup truck windows show a spikey-haired boy peeing on the president's name.

"Stop the War on Coal," yard signs demand. "Fire Obama."

Only a few generations ago, coal miners were literally at war with their employers, spilling and shedding blood on West Virginia's Blair Mountain in a historic battle for union representation and fair treatment.

Today, their descendants are allies in a carefully choreographed rhetorical war playing out across eastern Kentucky, southwestern Virginia and all of West Virginia. It's fueled by a single, unrelenting message that they now face a common enemy — the federal government — that has decided that coal is no longer king, or even noble.

Blame the president, the script goes. Blame the Environmental Protection Agency. And now that it's election season, blame all incumbent politicians — even those who have spent their careers in a delicate dance, trying to make mines safer while

allowing their operators to prosper.

The war on coal is a sound bite and headline, perpetuated by pundits, power companies and public relations consultants who have crafted a neat label for a complex set of realities, one that compels people to choose sides.

It's easier to call the geologic, market and environmental forces reshaping coal — cheap natural gas, harder-to-mine coal seams, slowing economies — some kind of political or cultural "war" than to acknowledge the world is changing, and leaving some people behind.

War, after all, demands victims. And in this case, it seems, victims demand a war.

Coal helped build America. It powered steam engines on railroads that opened up the West. It fueled homes and factories. It made a lot of people rich and others comfortable. By the early 1900s, more than 700,000 men and boys worked in the nation's mines, many for coal barons offering opportunity and brutality in equal measure.

The miners who resisted exploitation helped shape the principles of modern labor law: Pay by the hour. A week that lasts five days, not seven. Black men and white men paid the same.

Small towns sprang up along railroads and rivers that shipped the coal out. Miners were proud of their work, and still are. Today, though, fewer than 100,000 remain. Machines replaced many, while other jobs vanished as the fat, easily mined seams played out.

To hear industry tell it, those who remain are an endangered species in the crosshairs of overzealous environmental regulators directly responsible for wiping out thousands of jobs.

But in war, casualties are often inflated. The numbers are eye-catching, but details are lost. Too often, the narrative overlooks the fact that when layoffs occur, many workers transfer to other locations. One mine closes, another absorbs.

In reality, U.S. Department of Labor figures show the number of coal jobs nationwide has grown steadily since 2008, with consistent gains in West Virginia and Virginia, and ups and down in Kentucky.

There have been layoffs, to be sure.

Between January and June, coal companies in West Virginia, Virginia and Kentucky cut a combined 3,000 jobs. But mines in the Virginias still employed more people at the end of June than at the same points in 2008 and 2010, while Kentucky was only down by 1,000.

That coal faces challenges is a fact. It always has. During warm winters like the last one, for example, demand falls and stockpiles grow.

But what's happening now is more than a seasonal slump or even a response to new regulations.

It's a fundamental shift, and it's likely permanent, as even coal executives say. When St. Louis-based Patriot Coal filed for bankruptcy in July, it didn't mention a war. It said the industry is going through "a major correction," a convergence of "new realities in the market."

Environmental standards are growing tougher as Americans outside coal country demand clean air and water. Old, inefficient, coal-fired power plants are going offline or converting to natural gas, cutting into a traditional customer base. And that gas poses fierce, sustainable competition, thanks to advanced drilling technologies that make vast reserves more accessible than ever.

Even if the reviled regulations fell away, many experts say, coal's peak has passed.

Thin Appalachian seams won't magically thicken and become easier or cheaper to mine, as the West Virginia Center on Budget & Policy notes. Production in the East has been already falling for more than a decade, first surpassed by Western states like Wyoming in 1998.

Now, even those states are struggling as domestic demand dwindles. U.S. coal production plummeted 9.4 percent between the first and second quarters of 2012.

By the end of the year, coal is expected to account for less than 40 percent of all U.S. electricity production, the lowest level since the government began collecting data in 1949. By the end of the decade, it may be closer to 30 percent.

Operators are adjusting to survive.

On a single day in September, Virginia-based Alpha Natural Resources closed eight mines in four states, announcing that by early next year, some 1,200 jobs nationwide will be gone.

"That's 1,200 people not going to the grocery store," says Tracy Miller, a miner's wife in Keokee, Va.

Not going to Wal-Mart. Buying less gas. Postponing home improvements. Forgoing little luxuries like a dinner out.

Most of the first 400 cut were lucky; all but about 130 got transfers. Driving to a new job several hours away is hard, but it's better than no job at all. For those truly out of work, options are limited. Logging, maybe. More likely, something in the service sector.

"But if there's no coal mines," Miller says, "there's not going to be a Dollar Store, either."

Coal remains the economic pillar of many Appalachian communities, the foundation of a mono-economy that political leaders have for generations lacked either the will or the ability to diversify.

Without coal, families can't put food on the table or pay for the roofs over their heads.

The specter of losing it creates fear, frustration and anger.

"I've done a lot of praying, and my family's done a lot of praying. We've literally been scared to death," says Shana Lucas, whose husband Trent was among the lucky ones, transferred when the layoffs hit Wise, Va.

"I don't think people understand the lack of job opportunities here," she says. "Coal is the only thing we have here besides fast-food restaurants."

A miner can make $30 an hour, plus overtime — as opposed to the $8 an hour in the service industry.

"They have worked so, so hard, and they are losing everything they've worked for," Lucas says. "It's devastation to this place that we love and to the men that we look at as heroes."

Somebody must be to blame.

Obama is an easy target. He armed his opponents during a 2008 campaign interview that touched on global warming.

"If somebody wants to build a coal-powered plant, they can," he said. "It's just that it will bankrupt them because they are going to be charged a huge sum for all that greenhouse gas that's being emitted."

He now espouses an "all of the above" energy strategy that includes a role for coal. But after he took office, the EPA provided more weapons to his critics.

It rolled out tough new air pollution standards, some of which had begun under the previous, Republican administration. It vetoed a permit for a massive West Virginia mountaintop removal mine four years after it was issued by the Army Corps of Engineers, triggering a federal court battle that's still playing out.

And EPA cracked down on the permitting process for mountaintop mining, a highly efficient and highly destructive form of strip mining unique to Appalachia. The practice of flat-topping mountains, then filling valleys and covering streams with rubble has divided communities and led to multiple confrontations between coal miners and environmental activists.

"I know we need the EPA to keep our laws," says Allen Gibson, a disabled surface miner from Elkhorn City, Ky., who recently helped organize a United for Coal demonstration that stretched across several states. "But instead of telling the

companies what to do to fix a problem, they shut the whole thing down."

The EPA, he says, just wants to collect fines.

"But when they do that, the miners lose," Gibson says. "I'm sick of seeing the little guy pay."

During the permitting dispute in 2010, companies crammed miners onto buses and packed public hearings, forging a formidable alliance of management and labor that drowned out the environmentalists.

"They have completely turned the men on their heels," says Nick Mullins, a 33-year-old former miner from Clintwood, Va., who blogs about coal country as The Thoughtful Coal Miner.

"They're paying them better, and they've managed to really win the hearts and minds," he says. Younger miners "didn't see how bad the coal companies were to the men before them. ... They don't know their own history.

"The industry has done this really, really good propaganda," he says. "It's really easy to buy into it, especially when you only hear one side of the story and you're shutting out the other side."

West Virginia University history professor Ken Fones-Wolf says coal companies have also tapped into a proud heritage, heading off any potential opposition miners might have by reminding them they are valuable family providers.

"They feel that being against coal somehow denigrates all the sacrifices that generations of their families have made to the development of this nation."

So they fight for their way of life.

War sells because fear sells.

It's an emotionally charged metaphor that has taken over much of political discourse in America, says Deborah Tannen, a linguistics professor at Georgetown University and author of "The Argument Culture."

There have been wars on drugs, wars on women, wars on the middle class. Why not a war on coal?

For people who want to govern, she says, war is about "destroying the opposition so they can get the power back." For media, it's about grabbing the attention of an easily distracted public. The more polarizing the voices, the more entertaining the story.

But such language, she says, contributes nothing to genuine understanding.

Rather, "it has this effect of making people angry, defensive and fearful," Tannen says. "It has a corrosive effect on the human spirit."

Two years ago, the phrase had only begun to creep into a conversation. Today, it's an inescapable, daily drumbeat, dominating not only conversation, but campaign ads and newscasts.

"The idea of taking land in a moving front, there's something there," says Bill Bissett, president of the Kentucky Coal Association.

"Yes, it's part of a PR campaign," he acknowledges. "But people are pretty jaded and pretty quick to recognize false arguments. The idea that we somehow hoodwinked people in the coalfields is a bit of a stretch.

"It's not just some PR machination," Bissett says. "It is a real, real concern."

In Kentucky, more than 55,000 people now drive vehicles with "Friends of Coal" license plates, a slogan that Bissett helped launch to get people emotionally invested. Instead of seeing the industry as faceless men in suits, they see the pickups next to them at the supermarket parking lot, the tags instantly identifying the like-minded.

So too, with the "war on coal."

Today, you're either friend or foe. Meaningful discussions and middle ground have vanished.

In one of his last major speeches in 2009, the late Sen. Robert C. Byrd warned that change was upon coal country. He chastised the industry for "scapegoating and stoking fear," calling it counterproductive.

"To be part of any solution," he said, "one must first acknowledge the problem."

The greatest threats to coal, Byrd warned, come not from regulations "but rather from rigid mindsets, depleting reserves and the declining demand."

Byrd was 91 at the time and revered in his home state of West Virginia. The speech was largely ignored.

But fast-forward three years to another Democrat who's dedicated his political career to the Mountain State.

When Sen. Jay Rockefeller gave a remarkably similar speech in June, deriding the industry for what he said were divisive, fear-mongering tactics, the state's Young Republicans said he'd "gone from out of touch to dangerous."

They even invoked the language of terrorism, suggesting he's "an anti-Mountain State sleeper cell that has lain dormant for 40 years."

Allen Johnson of Christians for the Mountains — a group that opposes mountaintop removal mining and advocates living "compatibly and sustainably" with the environment — sees such verbal smack-downs as nothing less than a threat to democracy.

"If any politician dares step over the coal line ... you will get hammered back into place, and quickly," says Johnson, of Frost, W.Va. "You just metaphorically crack

knuckles and knee caps."

Johnson, 64, once worked the coke ovens for U.S. Steel. He worked for a railroad that moved coal and a power plant that burned it. He wants people to have good livelihoods. He also wants balance, and a government that prevents uncontrolled pollution of earth, air and water.

"The EPA," he says, "is a patsy in the war on coal."

For the past 11 years, Kevin Spears has been a sought-after commodity — a young, healthy Caterpillar mechanic with nine mining job certifications and a willingness to work 60-75 hours a week.

But he lost his job in April when his employer ran out of money to finish reclaiming a strip mine site.

Spears has since applied for 20 positions, with no luck. He used to make $80,000-$110,000 a year, depending on overtime. With only a high school education, he earned more than a friend with a doctorate in psychology.

Today, he supports his girlfriend and their three children on $1,660 a month in unemployment compensation.

"You give up everything. You cut down to the bare essentials — food, water, power," says the 32-year-old from Pikeville, Ky.

Girlfriend LeAndra Conley juggles bills, deciding each week which to pay and which to postpone.

"This whole thing is crushing us," says Conley, who's going through a divorce and won't move her daughters away from their father to Texas, where Spears was offered a $35 an hour job.

"It's not something you think is ever going to happen," she says. "The coal was put here for us to use, and you can't survive without it.

"There's nothing else here, unless you want to work for a phone marketing company. And they only stay until their tax breaks expire, and then they pull out, too."

Mining supported three generations before her, and Conley is certain there's enough coal underground to support three more.

"But Obama said, 'I will bankrupt you,'" she says, "and he is."

The couple still believes life in the coalfields can go back to the way it was. Maybe not overnight, but in time.

As leaves change and a chill settles over the mountains, they pray for two things — a new president and a cold winter that forces people to crank up their furnaces.

"If something doesn't change for this area soon," Spears says, "it's either going to be migration or starvation."

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