

Rachel Maddow. 2019. *Blowout: Corrupted Democracy, Rogue State Russia, and the Richest, Most Destructive Industry on Earth*. Crown. 406 pages.

Modern society runs on oil. Today's drillers produce over 90 million barrels of oil worldwide every single day. Oil has become an imperative and with that imperative the people who provide that oil demand payment and control. The tradeoff is logical. However, what happens when the balance is out of whack? According to Maddow, "The oil and gas industry--left to its own devices--will mindlessly follow its own nature. It will make tons of money. It will corrode and corrupt and sabotage democratic governance. It will screw up and-in the end-fatally injure the whole freaking planet. And yes, it will also provide oil and gas along the way!" (p. 365).

In reviewing the cover of Rachel Maddow's new book Blowout, one would not assume that the State of Oklahoma is the subject of nearly half of the book. However, she compares it to petrostates such as Equatorial Guinea. The State of Oklahoma government is no match for Harold Hamm and big oil. News watchers will be familiar with the events that Maddow recounts but the way she strings them all together tells a story that doesn't quite get told in Oklahoma media.

Earthquake swarms started in Oklahoma in 2010 but it wasn't until 2015 that the Oklahoma Corporation Commission finally began to restrain the actions of the oil and gas producers and their injection wells. It took longer than necessary to pinpoint the cause of the earthquakes because oil and gas producers resisted data collection. It turned out not to be the fracking but the waste water disposal wells that were receiving billions of gallons of toxic water per year that were causing the earthquakes. Once the Oklahoma Corporation Commission finally began regulating the placement

of these wells and to keep waste water from being injected into the basement rocks the earthquakes began to abate. They also began shutting down area disposal wells when an earthquake happened.

On April 21, 2014, there was a discussion about taxation on horizontal drilling. Four men met to hammer it out: Harold Hamm, Larry Nichols from Devon Energy, Doug Lawler, and Preston Dorflinger, Mary Fallin's Budget Director. The oil barons set the rate which was rubber stamped by Dorflinger. The deal was passed by the legislature almost identically. Why? And why was this meeting held at Mary Fallin's house yet she did not attend?

Maddow explores the Resource Curse which is the phenomenon when a state laden with natural resources is less democratic and has poor economic outcomes for its people. Dictatorship and extreme income inequality are common in states with coal, diamonds, precious metals, or in the case of Blowout, oil and natural gas. The governments that Maddow details are Russia, Equatorial Guinea, and the State of Oklahoma. She hints that the US government itself could also be added to the list.

Maddow traces the DNA of the oil business back to John D. Rockefeller and Standard Oil. Two things defined him as an oil baron: hatred of government regulation to the point of paranoia and frugality. One does not need to know much about the current oil business in the US to identify both of these traits still at work. Resistance to government regulation and taxation is clear. Leaders like Harold Hamm of Continental Resources often talk of the "ware on fossil fuel" and play hardball to keep taxes low and regulation minimal. Frugality is on display when remembering how little investment oil and gas has put into methods of environmental cleanup. We all know the tanker or pipeline will leak. What is the state of the art methodology employed for cleanup? Super duper paper towels made from the material that line baby diapers. Very few dollars have been spent on mitigation: "there is still no meaningful R&D investment in cleanup technology" (p. 349).

The rise and fall of Aubrey McClendon and Chesapeake Energy features prominently in Blowout. McClendon is the great uncle of Senator Robert S. Kerr, the founder of Kerr-McGee. He started his oil company in his 20s and began to bet that fracking would be the wave of the future in natural gas. He began to buy up rights across the country and his big bets would pay off. At least at the beginning. His big bets would bust in 2016 after being forced out of Chesapeake Energy and being investigated for price fixing. He died in a one-car crash with no skid marks left on the road.

Harold Hamm of Continental made a similar bet on new technology. He bet that horizontal drilling would open up the oil industry like fracking opened up gas. He too was correct and made billions of dollars.

How much is the US government controlled by oil and gas interests? Maddow focuses on two decisions. Keeping sanctions against Russia in place after Donald Trump was elected and whether oil companies would have to disclose payments to foreign governments.

Because Russia depends on outside expertise to run its oil industry – a problem caused by allowing inept oligarchs run the show – it is very limited by US sanctions that were put in place to punish Russia for its role in meddling in the US presidential election in 2016. These sanctions also block most avenues of funding that Donald Trump was depending on to finance a new tower in Moscow. The Trump Administration and Russia both were anxious to shake the sanctions. Maddow counts it as a triumph of bipartisanship that the US Congress voted very quickly in 2017 to bolster sanctions against Russia by making them statutory and not just based on an Obama Executive Order. Perhaps this is true but it doesn't completely show that Congress can act independently of oil interests. Just one major American company – ExxonMobil-- wanted to see the sanctions lifted. The sanctions may actually help American oil interests by slowing the competition.

In the 2010 Dodd-Frank act, section 1504 called for transparency for oil and gas industries operating in developing countries such as Equatorial Guinea. The theory was that transparency would reveal the amount of payments to top government officials and could help address or perhaps just understand the Resource Curse. Rex Tillerson hated section 1504 in 2010 when he was chairman of ExxonMobil and he still hated it as President Trump's Secretary of State. Senator Jim Inhofe authored the bill to kill it and it sailed through the Republican Congress. Senator Inhofe was also delighted to see President Obama's Clean Power Plan reversed and the US withdraw from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). So on the one hand, Congress was quick to keep Russian sanctions in place that would hobble Russian oil. But it cleared the zone for US oil and gas firms.

Also of interest to scholars in Oklahoma is the muzzling of Austin Holland, Oklahoma's seismologist with the Oklahoma Geological survey during the earthquake swarm of 2009-2014. As he sought to make the link between the injection wells and earthquakes, powerful people including Harold Hamm and OU President David Boren were putting pressure on him to blame the earthquakes on other causes. He eventually left Oklahoma after five years of pressure, but his careful research helped connect the dots between injection wells and earthquakes.

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