
“The Grand Energy Transition” film (and book) present provocative and persuasive case for Natural Gas development

By Patrick B. McGuigan
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A film shown Saturday as part of the deadCENTER Film Festival drew only a few dozen spectators – but that’s fine. It tells a story that has already found a “niche” audience, and will eventually expand to many more.

Since the 1970s, Robert A. Hefner III has pressed for more rapid development of America’s natural gas resources. He pioneered deep drilling techniques in western Oklahoma, finding “NatGas” far deeper than most scientists and many producers thought possible.

Although Hefner is a social liberal and has often supported Democrats over the years, Democratic President Jimmy Carter was responsible for sup-

pressing the growth of Natural Gas in the late 1970s – a drastic and ultimately disastrous policy decision to prevent the use of “limited” NatGas in power plants.

In those years and again in the 1980s, Hefner testified before Congress, documenting repeatedly that “there’s gas out there,” but being rebuffed by policymakers. Finally, late in the Reagan presidency, use of the resource opened up.

Hefner has long since won the argument about whether or not there are large supplies of NatGas still in the ground, but for the past decade-plus he’s moved into high gear on advocating policies to shift the country away from solid and liquid sources of energy and into the promising “bridge fuel to our sustainable future,” nat-

ural gas.

The foregoing paragraphs summarize many (but not all) of the points made in a superior documentary, “The Grand Energy Transition,” from executive producer (and Academy Award winner) Gray Frederickson and director/writer Greg Mellot. The trio make this an all-Oklahoma production.

The pair worked closely with Hefner, and their product unabashedly presses forward Hefner’s prophetic interpretations.

Frederickson is best known for his work on The Godfather trilogy and “Apocalypse Now,” and was one of this year’s honorees at deadCENTER. A graduate of the University of Oklahoma, Frederickson is a longtime friend and admirer of Hef-

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ner, who lives and works here in Oklahoma City.

Mellott teaches at Oklahoma City Community College and has a long working history in the film industry, including work with Jackie Chan and two turns as director - this documentary and a 2007 story about Robert S. Kerr.

Drawn largely from Hefner's book of the same name, the documentary presses its case on the availability of gas, and its potential as an effective means to sustain American competitiveness, reduce reliance on foreign sources of oil and keep access to energy affordable for Americans of all income levels.

The book from which the documentary is drawn is an important presentation of Hefner's worldview - that energy use and dissemination is a driving force in human civilization. From his practical experience in the western Oklahoma oil (and gas) patch, Hefner eventually became (by necessity) a kind of philosopher of power production.

He crafted in his book a story line of humanity's use of solid fuels (wood and coal), the emergence of more efficient liquid fuel (crude oil, as refined) and the dawn of "sustainable energy gases" - with NatGas leading the way and allowing time needed to develop wind, solar and hydrogen sources of energy.

A few words about the film from the technical and "presentation" sides. It is a stellar example of the documentary craft, with both soaring natural vistas (many in forested or open areas of Oklahoma) and terrible examples of poverty from across the planet captured in glorious cinematography. The film-makers made deft use of graphics and special effects and a range of au-

thoritative voices throughout. All credit to Frederickson, Mellott and to the co-producers: Hefner's wife, MeiLi, and Mark Stansberry.

Significant contributions to the story are made by members of both political parties, and those without political agendas, including former U.S. Cabinet Secretary Dr. James Schlesinger, Professor John Deutch and many others. Former Oklahoma Governor David Walters (who has fashioned a successful business career in power production around the world), oil and gas innovator T. Boone Pickens, Corporation Commissioner Robert Anthony and many others appear on camera, in quotable and effective commentaries.

Narration is provided by Commander John B. Herrington, the former astronaut (and Chickasaw Indian, first Native American to fly in outer space). Herrington is clearly sympathetic to Hefner's message, yet draws him out effectively with a series of brief exchanges.

The film relies on the book for its core arguments, but the film focuses much more on a defense of fracking technology (which has been utilized since the 1940s). Chesapeake Energy and Devon Energy workers and analysts appear often in defense of the technology, and in praise of the possibilities for NatGas.

In addition to Walters, Anthony, Stansberry, Schlesinger, Pickens, and Deutch the filmmakers credit a range of individuals (many of them Oklahomans) with bringing the story to the big screen, in-

cluding, George Solich, Cordillera Energy, Mark A. Stansberry, Energy Advocates, Dale Tracy, Ted Turner (also often on camera), Unit Corporation, Bob Harden, Jeff McDougall, T. Boone Pickens, Taylor Shinn, George Dunn, Jay Ewing, First Liberty Bank, Rod Frates, Paul Hagemeyer, Brent Halldorson, Salem Abraham Professor Graham Allison, Bill Anoatubby, Bob Anthony, Martha Burger and Creative Oklahoma.

One can view this motion picture and reach conclusions contrary to Hefner's, at least in some cases. He is especially antagonistic toward continued use of coal, a bit less critical of oil, and dubious that solar and wind power (which he supports) can ever provide the power volumes that natural gas has already delivered. He clearly views government subsidies to coal and oil with hostility, and by implication implies most resource allocation decisions should be made in the marketplace.

It is undeniable Hefner was right about plentiful natural gas when most of the "experts" at Big Oil companies and in federal authority were catastrophically wrong. There seems little room for doubt that he is right about the adaptive and flexible uses of natural gas, as it fuels modest growth in manufacturing right here in Oklahoma.

Hefner has long enjoyed a personal friendship with Aubrey McClendon, who appears often on-camera in this film, praising Hefner for car-

rying the NatGas torch when it might otherwise have flared out in the 1970s and 1980s. Hefner is proving as prophetic as another (and very different) Oklahoman, Harold Hamm – who has said for at least the last 10 years that oil was available domestically, in deep drilling. Look at North Dakota to decide who was right – Hamm or the national “experts.”

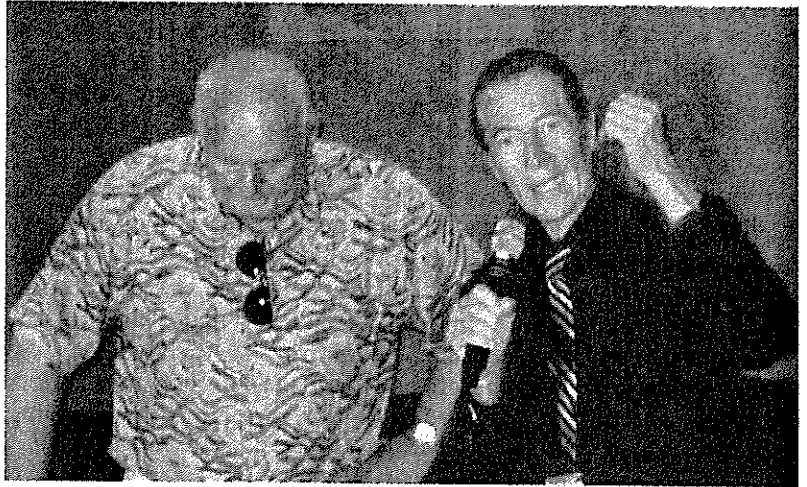
There are reasons to believe a combination of the visions of each of these men (Hefner, McClendon and Hamm) provides a plausible outline for a future in which America leads the way to affordable energy production, away from reliance on foreign oil and gas, and toward rational, market-based and fiscally-sustainable economics.

The fact that such individuals often disagree among themselves is merely evidence that competition and determination and as important as capital and innovation in the delivery of goods and services in an increasingly diverse and competitive world.

There is hope, education and edification in the viewing “the Grand Energy Transition.” The film and the book are both highly recommended.

The organizers of deadCENTER deserve a salute for providing a big-screen showing of the film here in Hefner’s home town. The documentary will air on OETA at 9 p.m. CST on Tuesday, Aug. 14.

Disclosure: McGuigan assisted Hefner when he wrote his book. Information on complimentary copies of the documentary DVD, and how to order the book, can be found at a website Hefner has constructed here: www.the-get.com/order/index.php.



At the deadCENTER Film Festival presentation of “The Grand Energy Transition” documentary, from left, Executive Producer Gray Frederickson and writer/director Greg Mellot answer questions about the film, which focused on three decades of natural gas advocacy by Robert A. Hefner III of Oklahoma City’s GHK company. Photo by Patrick B. McGuigan.