

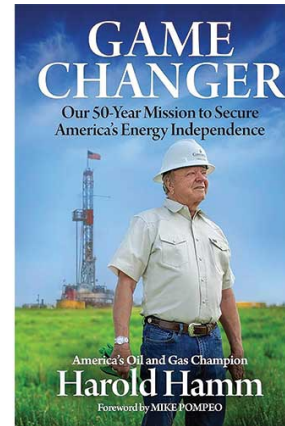


Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on October 10, 2023

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Pipelines, Power, Politics

Getting the facts is only half of the job; the other half — usually the more important part — is using those facts intelligently. It's accurate to note, for example, that gasoline prices have been rising; an intelligent response to stop that increase would be for the United States to produce more domestic oil and natural gas. However, standing squarely against the smart way is the federal government.



In August, Harold Hamm, a geologist and energy producer with more than a half-century of experience in the field, observed in *The Wall Street Journal* that President Joe Biden has been taking the opposite strategy. “Instead of increasing production, he wants to mandate that Americans use less — by banning or restricting the use of gas stoves, gas heat, air conditioning and even cars with combustion engines. That is a recipe for lower living standards, higher prices and a waning of America’s geopolitical leadership.”

To his credit, and to the nation’s potential benefit, Hamm has authored an entire new book on this theme, *Game Changer: Our 50-Year Mission to Secure America’s Energy Independence*. Beyond promoting needed production, it also demonstrates how related “conventional wisdom” has been imprudent — or worse.

As former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo observes in the foreword of this volume, Hamm’s message is both about America’s energy history and the nation’s future. “The energy independence achieved under the Trump administration was done away with by those who followed us. This happened because the objectives of too many policymakers today no longer revolve around the prosperity of the American people; rather, they sacrifice American prosperity in pursuit of vague, lofty, and ever-changing goals related to climate change and green energy.”

Readers along for the ride get to see Hamm — the 13th child of an Oklahoma tenant farmer — in his early years. When he was young, his home had no electricity or indoor plumbing. There were kerosene lamps and an icebox, with blocks of ice being delivered weekly from town. What he did have — and Hamm mentions this several times unabashedly — was what America offers: opportunity.

He worked from the literal bottom, cleaning out sludge from oilfield stock tanks. Later, there was trucking work. He began with high hopes and low overhead to eventually make his mark and head Continental Resources, which currently operates in four of America’s premier basins and is one of the largest producers of oil and gas in the United States. He has promoted his industry energetically and advised U.S. presidents.

In recent years, Hamm has “stepped up” to be executive chairman at Continental; it’s a long way from his start as a young man when, as he relates, he “put in a million miles on my old water truck before I found a geologic drop of oil.”

Hamm has found more than a few such drops since then.



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Developing Horizontal Drilling

A key “game changer,” a term used multiple times in the book, is Horizontal Drilling (employing the author’s capitalization). That is often called “fracking” by the media. Don’t worry about overly complicated geological explanations, but there are enough details to provide nonspecialists with an idea about what is involved. If the nation experiences an energy renaissance (as it did, growing from five million barrels of oil per day to 13 million barrels in less than two decades), it is advisable to see why this game changer works. (Helpful schematics are included.)

Imagine the established way, explains Hamm, with a typical vertical well intersecting “with sixty square feet of a reservoir.” Then think of it, he continues, as if it were

the bottom of big straw. A horizontal well two miles long has eighty thousand square feet of wellbore exposure compared to the sixty square feet of a vertical. Modern techniques using water and sand stimulate natural fractures in the rock — effectively increasing the exposure to two hundred thousand square feet and creating 12 *million* square feet of wellbore exposure. Imagine a straw with a lot of holes in it. Then turn the straw on its side. This straw effectively enables us to unlock reservoirs we could not produce vertically. [Emphasis in original.]

If some of that appears byzantine, here’s the key: We have learned, as Hamm did, that only an estimated 15 percent of hydrocarbons were being tapped through conventional drilling. With Horizontal Drilling, he writes, “the key to accessing the remaining 85 percent of untapped oil and gas in the U.S. was at my fingertips.”

As for the “fracking” term, it seems that something was rotten, not in Denmark, but from around two thousand miles to the east. In Moscow. According to a 2018 congressional investigation (specific citations are provided), Russia was trying to sway energy markets in the United States through social media. One such move was, notes *Game Changer*, “to promote the label of ‘fracking’ — and the term stuck for many reasons. Those opposing the increased energy output that Horizontal Drilling enables wanted to make the technology a ‘four-letter word’ to sour public opinion. And they did.”

Meanwhile, even as warnings continued in the United States and Europe about fracking’s supposed cataclysmic impact, Moscow was trying to advance its capabilities. “Unsurprisingly, Russia uses the technology today.”

Cracking the Bakken

Among such highlights there are plenty of lowlights, especially those emanating from Washington — where many politicians may have good memories, but hope that other people do not. Hamm does.

And the author also reminds us throughout about the defeatist and damaging policies under other presidents and administrations, from both major parties. There’s Jimmy Carter’s fearmongering the nation in 1977 with false portents, contending that the “oil and natural gas we rely on for 75 percent of our energy are simply running out.” His answer: “We need to shift to plentiful coal.” (Be advised that Hamm’s distaste of coal is visceral.) Joe Biden, then a senator from Delaware, voted in favor of Carter’s demand for the shift to coal.



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There's a sizable, bulleted list in *Game Changer* of the legislation and regulations that were spawned by Carter's push. "While the right hand of government was digging for coal," recalls Hamm, "the left hand was slapping the oil and natural gas sector with price controls, ensuring no one would look for more." A windfall-profits tax ensued. We are still living with the fallout of some of these moves, even in foreign policy. For instance, Washington pushed

to sell coal to new markets in Asia. Along with the raw materials, we exported our coal-burning technology to the rest of the world so that thousands more coal-fired plants were built worldwide, spiking pollution across the globe. All the while, they labeled it "clean coal," an oxymoron designed to smokescreen a flawed strategy. Incidentally, hundreds of coal plants are still being built in China and India today, primarily by Chinese firms that immediately copied the U.S. technology for coal plant construction.

Other outcomes surfaced: the birth of radical environmentalism and more regulations from the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy. This led to further distortion of the energy market.

While some chapters highlight the ways not to go, others show what to do and why. In Montana and North Dakota, Continental officials worked with locals to get rid of burdensome regulations that were killing the energy industry. The result is described in the chapter "Shale Yes! Cracking the Code of the Bakken," referring to a formation in the region that is a layering of sedimentary rock under the surface of the earth. Because Hamm and his team "zigged when the 'experts' zagged, we found the reservoirs," observes the author.

One suspects that Hamm is correct when he says, pointing to his logs, maps, and charts, that he probably knows "more about what's underground" than what's above. In the earlier part of this century, we read in *Game Changer*, Continental estimated that there were between "twenty and thirty billion barrels in the Bakken, five to seven times more than the government calculated." As the author puts it, "Time and technology proved us right. Our estimates today are at the higher range near thirty-five billion barrels and could go higher with secondary, and possibly, tertiary recovery, CO₂ injection, and continued advances in technology."

If readers didn't realize before, there are reminders that there are takers in government offices and makers and doers in the field. Millions of jobs were created through Horizontal Drilling, as well as a supply of reliable energy. "Production tax dollars enjoyed a \$1 trillion swing to the positive," writes Hamm, "meaning a \$1 trillion surplus back into the pockets of consumers of the world, all because we are exporting energy and keeping our energy dollars at home."



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Drilling revolution: Hydraulic fracturing technology, or “fracking,” has led to a massive increase in recoverable oil and natural gas. Here workers drill for oil in the Bakken Formation in North Dakota. (AP Images)

What Will Guide Energy’s Future?

There’s plenty to applaud in *Game Changer* — in particular the energy and economic stances — though the author’s political observations occasionally fall short (such as with Bill Gates, described as a “friend” that he met through mutual philanthropic efforts). Hamm does say that sometimes “friends respectfully disagree, and Bill and I certainly have different perspectives on how to combat climate issues.” In the book’s chapter “It’s Easy Being Green,” the author is decidedly more pointed in his negative opinion of Larry Fink from the multinational investment company BlackRock, and that firm’s stance on ESG (environmental, social, and corporate governance) issues — charging that Fink has been “cynically manipulating markets to add to his trillions.”

While considering himself a friend of the environment, Hamm doesn’t back off when he sees counterproductive policies, such as those that led to catastrophic power failures in Texas and other parts of the Southwest in 2021. In a discussion of causes, Hamm observes that most “of the Texas grid was relying on intermittent and unreliable renewables. The table was being set for disaster.”

Then there’s California. “To some” — presumably meaning those who are discerning — “California is a failed experiment gone off the rails — a progressive la-la land where every bad idea is being put in place.” Gasoline and electricity are more expensive there. “The state inflicts the highest gasoline taxes in the country. These taxes are regressive and hurt those who can least afford it.” He keeps at this for a good bit. Deservedly. Discussing California’s officials, the author observes, “Instead of making the necessary public investments in energy, water, and transportation, their strategy seems to be making a car too expensive, crushing new housing builds, and forcing the rationing of electricity by making it more expensive.”

Overall, readers can take heart when realizing that successes are often built on a multitude of failures. This was the case for the author and his efforts. There’s been a big payoff from under the ground. He and his team are proud to be the “number one producer of oil and natural gas in Oklahoma, the number one producer of oil and of natural gas in North Dakota, the second-largest lease-holder in the Power



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River Basin of Wyoming, and a top ten oil and natural gas producer in the nation.”

Using that energy supply, he sees an opportunity “to lift the rest of the world out of energy poverty as soon as possible.” His book repeatedly counters, with facts as opposed to empty emotions, the naysayers and those who disparage his industry, promoting his belief that “the only way to do it quickly and responsibly is with a reliable oil and natural gas supply.”

One hopes that much of this verve makes its way into the new Hamm Institute for American Energy — part of his “Giving Back” efforts. The institute maintains that it promotes scholastic excellence in the field of energy development and production. We need, insists Hamm, energy “to be *accessible* and *affordable* to all, and we need to get it done in the most sustainable and environmentally sound way as possible.” For potential doubters, he adds, “If you are wondering if ‘accessible and affordable’ means government control or some form of socialism, you can forget it.”



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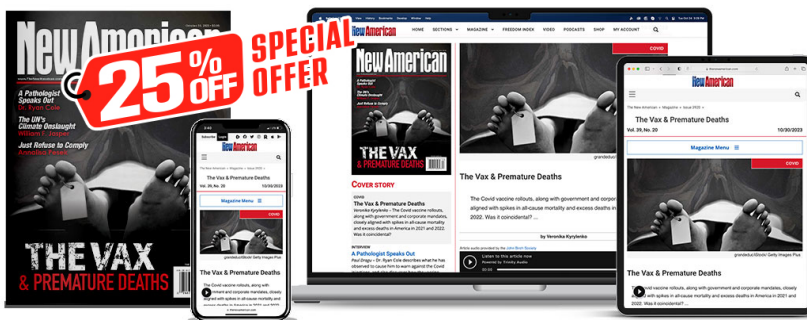
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