

American Citizens in Appalachia Are Living in a State of Terror

AN OPEN LETTER TO PRESIDENT OBAMA

February 19, 2009

Dear Mr. President,

As I write this letter, I brace myself for another round of nerve-racking explosives being detonated above my home in the mountains of West Virginia. Outside my door, pulverized rock dust, laden with diesel fuel and ammonium nitrate explosives hovers in the air, along with the residual of heavy metals that once lay dormant underground.

The mountain above me, once a thriving forest, has been blasted into a pile of rock and mud rubble. Two years ago, it was covered with rich black topsoil and abounded with hardwood trees, rhododendrons, ferns and flowers. The understory thrived with herbs such as ginseng, black cohosh, yellow root and many other medicinal plants. Black bears, deer, wild turkey, hawks, owls and thousands of [other] birds lived here. The mountain contained sparkling streams teeming with aquatic life and fish.

Now it is all gone. It is all dead. I live at the bottom of a mountaintop removal coal-mining operation in the Peachtree community.

Mr. President Obama, I am writing you because we have simply run out of options. Last week, the 4th U.S. Circuit Court in Richmond, Va., overturned a federal court ruling for greater environmental restrictions on mountaintop removal permits. Dozens of permits now stand to be rushed through. As you know, in December, the EPA under George W. Bush allowed an 11th hour change to the stream buffer zone rule, further unleashing the coal companies to do as they please.

During your presidential campaign, you declared: "We have to find more environmentally sound ways of mining coal than simply blowing the tops off mountains."

That time is now. Or never.

Every day, more than three million pounds of explosives are detonated in our state to remove our mountains and expose the thin seams of coal. Over 470 mountains in Appalachia have been destroyed in this process, the coal scooped up and hauled away to be burned at coal-fired power plants across our country and abroad. This includes the

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Potomac River Plant, which generates the electricity for the White House.

Mountaintop removal is the dirty secret in our nation's energy supply. If coal can't be mined clean, it can't be called clean. Here, at the point of extraction, coal passes through a preparation plant that manages to remove some, but not all, of the metals and toxins. Those separated impurities are stored in mammoth toxic sludge dams above our communities throughout Appalachia.

There are three sludge dams within 10 miles of my home. Coal companies are now blasting directly above and next to a dam above my home that contains over two billion gallons of toxic waste. That is the same seeping dam that hovers just 400 yards above the Marsh Fork Elementary School. As you know, coal sludge dams have failed before, and lives have been lost.

My family and I, like many American citizens in Appalachia, are living in a state of terror. Like sitting ducks waiting to be buried in an avalanche of mountain waste, or crushed by a falling boulder, we are trapped in a war zone within our own country.

In 1968, I served my country in Vietnam as part of the 1st Battalion 12th Marines, 3rd Marine Division. As you know, Appalachians have never failed to serve our country; our mountain riflemen stood with George Washington at the surrender of the British in Yorktown. West Virginia provided more per capita soldiers for the Union during the Civil War than any other state; we have given our blood for every war since.

We have also given our blood for the burden of coal in these mountains. My uncle died in the underground mines at the age of 17; another uncle was paralyzed from an accident. My dad worked in an underground mine. Many in my family have suffered from black lung disease.

These mountains are our home. My family roots are deep in these mountains. We homesteaded this area in the 1820s. This is where I was born. This is where I will die.

On Jan. 15, 1972, U.S. Sen. John D. Rockefeller made a speech at Morris Harvey College. He declared: "The government has turned its back on the many West Virginians who have borne out of their property and out of their pocketbook the destructive impact of strip-mining. We hear that the governor once claimed to have wept as he flew over the strip mine devastation of our state. Now it's the people who weep."

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Our state government has turned its back on us in 2009.

Peachtree is but one of hundreds of Appalachian communities that are being bombed. Our property has been devalued to worthlessness. Our neighbors put their kids to bed at night with the fear of being crushed or swept away in toxic sludge. And the outside coal industries continue their criminal activity through misleading and false ads.

Mr. President, when I heard you talk during your campaign stops, it made me feel like there was hope for Peachtree and the Coal River Valley of West Virginia. Hope for me and my family.

Abraham Lincoln wrote that we cannot escape history: "The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation."

I beg you to re-light our flame of hope and honor and immediately stop the coal companies from blasting so near our homes and endangering our lives. As you have said, we must find another way than blowing off the tops of our mountains. We must end mountaintop removal.

I also ask you to please put an end to these dangerous toxic-sludge dams.

With utmost respect, yours truly,

Bo Webb

Naoma, W.V.