

Mountaintop Removal in West Virginia

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Introduction

This debate will address the issue of mountaintop removal mining (MTR) and whether this kind of mining should continue. This case will deal specifically with individuals in the small community of Blair Mountain located in West Virginia. The issue will be viewed from several different perspectives in order to gain a full image of the pros and cons of this form of coal mining. The roles include:

- Thelma Holstein, a poor, rural woman concerned with her family's well-being
- Mike Finn, a young activist fighting for preservation of the landscape
- John Davis, a pro-MTR miner
- Stanley Gillespie, a recently laid-off miner who is now against MTR
- Louis Smith, the CEO of a large MTR mining company.

By showing the backgrounds and opinions of the various characters, the case debate should illustrate the difficulty in permitting or limiting mountaintop removal mining.

Setting

Blair Mountain is a small, unincorporated community located within Logan County, West Virginia. Logan County has a population of around 35,500 residents. It is a fairly poor county with 23% of the population living below the poverty line, compared with the state average of 17%. Most citizens reach only a high school education. Only 9% of residents have earned a Bachelor's degree or higher. Therefore, most employed citizens work in unskilled jobs that do not require any form of higher education.¹

Background Information

The community of Blair Mountain, West Virginia has a history of struggles concerning coal mining. In 1921, a group of disgruntled miners mounted an insurrection against the operators of the mine on Blair Mountain. The workers were upset about the company's corrupt policies that essentially left workers indebted to the company, even as the workers had to pay for their own equipment from the company store. On a morning in August 1921, 15,000 coal miners marched up the side of Blair Mountain only to be met with gunfire from company-hired mercenaries. After five days of fighting between the miners and the mercenaries, the battle ended in the company's favor. While the miners did not immediately triumph, the effects of their actions continue to resonate with the miners who struggle with the companies they work for in the present.²

In 2011, eighty years after the original Battle of Blair Mountain, a new battle is taking place on the mountain. In this new struggle, several coal companies are attempting to use a form of mining called mountaintop removal (MTR). This form of mining is very destructive to the land as it blasts off the topsoil from mountains, dumps the dirt and sludge into adjacent valleys, and exposes seams of coal to be mined. Miners then use explosives on the dirt under these seams to expose new seams and continue mining. MTR mining ruins the mountainous landscapes as it rids the land of all natural foliage and creates alternate moonscapes of flattened mountains and altered ecosystems.³

¹ Statistics come from the U.S. Census Bureau's records for Logan County, WV, 2009

² Shogan tells the complete story of the insurrection on Blair Mountain in [The Battle of Blair Mountain](#)

³ Process of MTR is detailed in Fox's article, *Mountaintop Removal in West Virginia* (165)

MTR also affects communities around mining sites as it destroys access to clean headwaters by dumping sludge into creeks and toxifying the water.⁴ Community members also report disturbances from the near-constant explosions. The blasts shake the ground and often crack foundations in nearby homes. MTR mining also exposes noxious gases to the air so that community members often report getting toxic dust buildup in their houses or closed spaces, such as closed freezers.⁵

If MTR is permitted to continue on Blair Mountain, the community will continue to experience these negative effects, as well as experience a loss of jobs. Studies have shown that MTR actually employs fewer miners than more traditional forms of deep shaft mining because the technological advances require fewer workers to extract a greater amount of coal.⁶

Many community members are banding together in an attempt to discontinue this form of mining in their community as they have seen its effects.

Contrasting with dissenters of MTR, some community members continue to support this type of mining. They see the benefits that MTR contributes to their economy and are not prepared to give up their access to good paying jobs because of environmental issues. To many community members, coal keeps the lights on, in more ways than one. If coal is to remain as a large source of energy for the country, West Virginia might as well get a piece of the profit. The environment has been given to humanity to be used and enjoyed to its fullest extent. Therefore, we have a right to take control of the land and use it in a way that will benefit all.⁷

Debate Participants

Because the opinions on MTR vary vastly, especially in West Virginia, it is important to view the issue from a number of different perspectives. Below are several different roles that represent the different viewpoints that West Virginians hold about the issue. After reading these stances, one will be more able to assess the difficulty of policy making regarding MTR mining.

Thelma Holstein

Thelma Holstein was born and raised in the mountains surrounding Blair Mountain. Her father worked in a coal mine located very close to her home. Her mother worked full-time at home to raising Thelma and Thelma's seven siblings. Growing up in a mining town was very difficult because Thelma's family, like many others in her town, was very poor. Her father suffered from health issues resulting from the dust he was exposed to in the mines everyday.⁸ Thelma's mother was extremely resourceful as she fed and clothed her large family on a very small budget.⁹

As the result of two failed marriages, Thelma has four grown children and six grandchildren.¹⁰ Two of her grandchildren live in her small trailer with Thelma. Thelma has difficulty finding a good-paying job because of the emphasis on male-dominated labor in her community. Therefore, Thelma was forced to

⁴ "Virtually every stream at a mountaintop removal site becomes contaminated" from Fox's article, *Mountaintop Removal in West Virginia* (166)

⁵ Mattea describes dust that "builds up inside a closed freezer" in *A Call to my Appalachian Brothers and Sisters*

⁶ "Massive draglines, which are geared to the removal of the largest amount of coal at the least cost for the corporations." (165) From Fox's article, *Mountaintop Removal in West Virginia*

⁷ The various arguments in favor of MTR are detailed in Barry's article, *Mountaineers Are Always Free?*

⁸ Many coal miners suffer from black lung or "miner's asthma" as detailed in Scott's book, *Removing Mountains* - Light's book, *Coal Hollow*, also details the difficulty in growing up in families of sick fathers (127)

⁹ "Most women in West Virginia occupy rural areas and head families living poverty." Barry's article (119)

¹⁰ "Almost half of West Virginia women live alone, being single, separated, or divorced." Barry's article (119)

creatively earn money. Everyday, Thelma scavenges old clothing and refurbishes them to sell alongside the highway.¹¹

Although neither Thelma nor any of her offspring has worked in a mine, she is still directly affected by the emphasis on mining nature in her community. As Thelma's home is very close to one of the mines on Blair Mountain, Thelma hears the explosions from MTR daily. Sometimes the explosions continue into the night, and she has difficulty getting her two young grandchildren to sleep. Thelma often worries about the proximity of the blasts because with every explosion the ground beneath her trailer quakes. She does not have enough money to hire an expert to explore the strength of her home, but she believes that the explosions are causing stress on the trailer that will one day result in massive damage.¹²

Thelma also is affected by MTR because of its effects on her access to clean water. When water does come out of her pipes, it is often murky, black, and unsafe to drink.¹³ Therefore, Thelma often relies on the well outside of her home for clean water. But often when Thelma attempts to retrieve water from the well, she has found it empty. She has tried calling the coal company that mines near her home, but they have yet to send a representative or provide any explanation for why this is occurring. Many of Thelma's neighbors have reported similar problems.¹⁴ Thelma worries that the issue of obtaining clean water will continue as the head streams that supply her stream are dumped on with sludge from the mines.¹⁵ This is a prime issue for Thelma, as she must care for herself and her two grandchildren. The lack of clean water becomes a pressing issue when she must cook meals or bathe her family.

Although Thelma is aware of the deteriorating condition of the community, she feels a very strong attachment to the land and does not wish to leave.¹⁶ She appreciates what coal mining has done for the community because it has provided generations of her family with jobs, but she has also seen the negative effects of this mining. She is concerned with the health and safety of her grandchildren. She wants them to have a better life than the one she has been afforded. Therefore, she is generally opposed to MTR because of its effects on her land and the general souring of the community. If the mining companies are held to stricter regulations regarding the dumping of their waste and the impacts on the surrounding communities, Thelma might consider supporting the mining of Blair Mountain.¹⁷ But until the explosions and the issues with her water supply can be resolved, Thelma remains firmly opposed to the destruction of the mountain.

Mike Finn

Mike Finn is a graduate student from the University of California – San Diego. He is originally from Charleston, WV, which is located about forty miles north of Blair Mountain. Mike has returned home from college to work with the activist group, Save Blair Mountain. This group aims to preserve the mountain by ceasing MTR on the site. Mike is committed to ending the practice of mountaintop removal because it is destroying the beauty of the state that he loves.

Mike has chosen to focus his work on Blair Mountain because of the viable avenues of change available to activists. He is currently working with fellow activists in the area to get the sites of the Battle of Blair

¹¹ "Weiss claims that only 36 percent of West Virginia women work in the formal economy." Barry's article (119)

¹² Details of dynamite explosions and their effects on surrounding communities from Barry's article (119)

¹³ Mattea describes "black water coming from the faucet" in *A Call to My Appalachian Brothers and Sisters*

¹⁴ Loeb describes a similar circumstance with 30 neighbors losing water in their wells and homes near a mining site in southern West Virginia in her book, *Moving Mountains*

¹⁵ "Department of Natural Resources found that 70 percent of the state's streams and rivers are polluted." Barry's article (123)

¹⁶ Many residents want to leave but find it either too expensive or feel too attached to the land to leave, Barry's article (122)

¹⁷ Barry found that many rural women against MTR are primarily concerned with its effects on their families and community (125)

Mountain placed on the National Register of Historic Places so that the mountain would be safe from destructive mining practices. The group Mike is working with is currently documenting all archaeological finds associated with both the battle and the mining community that existed during the time of the battle. They hope to add to the portfolio of information used as evidence to preserve Blair Mountain.¹⁸

The group recently faced a major setback after they were first placed on the register in 2009 but were then removed after a challenge from Massey Energy Company, a coal company that wanted to mine the area. Independent researchers later found that Massey used false evidence from property owners to get the site off of the register. Mike and his group are working on getting the site back on the National Register.¹⁹ Currently, the group is educating community members on ways that they can organize and contribute to research to build support for future National Register considerations.²⁰ By working through the lenses of preservation, Mike hopes the practice of MTR will also end on Blair Mountain.

Ultimately, Mike hopes to create a site of heritage tourism where travelers and community members could learn more about the original Blair Mountain battle, as well as life in a historic company town. In this way, visitors will be encouraged to appreciate the history of coal while also appreciating the history of the mountain. In this way, they will want to save more mountains from threats of destruction. Finally, the creation of hiking trails posted with historic information will be an environmentally friendly way to allow community members to learn about their history.²¹

Mike sees the benefits of preservation because it saves Blair Mountain from a fate of destruction while also preserving the community's important history. By putting the site on the National Register, the community will be saved from ecological destruction. Although Mike sees the importance of jobs in the community, he does not believe that any sort of mining, deep mining or mountain top removal mining will benefit the community in the future. Instead he advocates the creation of jobs through another ecologically viable alternative such as ecotourism or jobs created through the preservation of Blair Mountain.

John Davis

John Davis is a seventh generation miner. He is currently employed with Massey Energy Company on a mine location in Blair Mountain. John lives in the surrounding community with his wife and two children. The family is very close with their neighbors, most of whom are also employed by Massey.

John is an active supporter of MTR mining. In his opinion, MTR mining grants men with honest work to provide for their families. He earns a living wage, and the family lives comfortably on the single source of income. John sees his role in the family as breadwinner, and he is very serious about filling this role. According to John, real men are men who take care of their families. John never takes off work, and sick days are only taken when absolutely necessary.²²

John believes that those who are opposed to MTR mining are in conflict with the needs of the community. MTR provides men with honest work. According to John, men who do not work in the mines or in some other form of physical labor are not real men. Real men do not work in cushy offices with secretaries and

¹⁸ Brandon Nida, a member of Save Blair Mountain, talks about the goals of the project in his article (2010)

¹⁹ Nida details the struggle of being put on the register and then being removed after a challenge from Massey (11)

²⁰ Save Blair Mountain is attempting to involve lower or working class families in archaeological research about their own history, from Nida's article (16)

²¹ Save Blair Mountain is working towards all of these goals, detailed in Nida's article (19)

²² Scott shows how men are very devoted to their work and rarely take off work in her book. (66)

sick days.²³ John feels a deep sense of pride about his work and often wears his uniform when going into town so that others will recognize him as a miner and treat him with respect.²⁴

John also believes that MTR mining is benefitting the community greatly. First, MTR provides men in the community with good jobs and good pay. This is crucial because without this industry, the community would not have another type of work to fall back on.²⁵ Second, the mining company is making use of land that would otherwise be left untouched. John thinks that God provided vast amounts of coal in the land to afford the country good clean energy.²⁶ John firmly believes that “Coal keeps the lights on,” and that not mining coal would be a waste of the land. Third, land used for MTR is reclaimed and flattened after mining has ended.²⁷ Therefore, the community can more adequately use it for development. Where before, the land was mountainous and difficult to traverse; now companies can develop large areas of land that were previously difficult to traverse.

Although John is aware of the history of Blair Mountain, he believes in a new era of coal mining. John thinks that the Battle of Blair Mountain was warranted as the coal companies were taking extreme advantage of their workers. However, in the new era of coal, John is provided with a strong living wage and the power to make his own decisions about his work.

John will continue to fight against the preservation of the land by “lizard-lover” environmentalists who do not care about the value of the land the way that John does.²⁸ He sees no alternative to this sort of mining. Although many of his miner friends have been laid off due to MTR, John believes that the answer to the lay-offs is to open more MTR mines to further take advantage of the land. He gets great pride from using the strength of his body to earn a wage to support his wife and children, and he plans on continuing in this profession until he can retire comfortably in the future.

Stanley Gillespie

Stanley also comes from a long line of miners, much like John. Stanley was also employed with Massey Energy Company working on a MTR mine until he was laid-off six months ago.²⁹ Stanley lives with his girlfriend of ten years. Both completely depended on Stanley’s paycheck from Massey before he was laid off. Now they must make do with the unemployment check that Stanley receives. Stanley’s girlfriend has tried to get a job, but most of the jobs in their community are male-dominated and labor intensive.³⁰ As Stanley and his girlfriend are both high school graduates, they have difficulty finding work in the professional sector.³¹ Therefore, they continue to live frugally in the tiny trailer that Stanley owns near Blair Mountain.

²³ Scott defines what a “real man” is and how miners perceive this stereotype in her book (67)

²⁴ Miners sometimes wear their uniforms in small mining communities after work to show that they are proud of their profession. Detailed in Light’s book. (131)

²⁵ “West Virginia is primarily a single-industry state, with many residents ... relying most heavily on the coal industry for employment.” Barry’s article (118)

²⁶ This is often used as justification for mining. From iLoveMountains.org

²⁷ Land is “reclaimed” and flattened after MTR. Often this new flat land is used for golf courses or business parks. From iLoveMountains.org

²⁸ During a commemoration of the Battle of Blair Mountains, proponents of MTR yelled at environmentalists, “Lizard-lovers go home.” Barry’s article, *Mountaineer’s are always free?* (116)

²⁹ New advances in coal mining are laying off more workers as fewer workers are needed as a result of new technologies for mining coal. Fox’s article, *Mountaintop Removal in West Virginia*, (169)

³⁰ Communities around coal mining emphasize male-dominated forms of labor and women often have difficulty finding jobs, Fox’s article

³¹ U.S. Census Bureau. 2011.

While the couple wishes to move out of the community to find jobs, they lack sufficient funds to relocate. Although Arch Coal has offered to buy their trailer, the price is not enough for the couple to properly relocate to another community, especially without the certainty of jobs.³² They must instead endure the explosions, water shortages, and unpredictable floods that result from MTR.³³

Before he was laid off, Stanley never cared about whether MTR was good for the community or not because it was providing him with a good living. Now that he is not reliant on MTR any longer, Stanley can see the negative effects MTR has on Blair Mountain and is working against MTR in his community. Instead of providing jobs to the community, Stanley has witnessed a number of coworkers lose their jobs due to the technological advances in MTR. Instead of furthering mining, these advances allow more coal to be mined by fewer workers while also enacting irreversible damage to the mountains. Stanley is a proponent of traditional deep mining because he believes that it will employ more workers and be more economically viable to the community.³⁴

Stanley has also experienced the life of a miner who is not a member of a union. When he was still working as a miner, Stanley often did not get a lunch break and was forced to work overtime for no pay. He now sees the illegality of his work and wishes to work against this anti-union zeal held in many MTR mines.³⁵ In the mine Stanley used to work on, workers were not hired if they were affiliated with a union. Stanley believes that MTR is to blame because it increasingly rids the mines of actual miners and replaces them with more advanced technologies.³⁶

Stanley believes that the mountain must be protected because it represents the power and strength that miners hold over coal companies. By letting MTR destroy Blair Mountain, miners would be letting coal companies exhibit their powerful, all-encompassing control over the land and its people. Stanley believes that the mountain must remain to serve as a reminder to all members of the community of their heritage and obligation to fight for their rights.³⁷

Stanley wishes to preserve the mountain and erect a memorial to the historic battle. Stanley has recently joined a group of unemployed miners who are keeping the history of the battle alive by donning red bandanas, such as the miners who fought in the first battle, to represent their dissent.³⁸ Stanley continues to worry that if the mountain is destroyed, the history behind the actions of those miners will also be forgotten.³⁹

Louis Smith

Louis Smith is a powerful CEO of a major coal company that is currently operating in West Virginia. He is constantly trying to expand the scope of his company and is, therefore, working towards expanding his mining into Blair Mountain. He believes that MTR mining is necessary for the continued growth of his company. MTR is great for his business, as fewer workers must be employed to mine larger amounts of coal.⁴⁰ He also believes that using new technologies in his business represents forward motion for West

³² "Coal companies, who offer \$100,000 and more for some homes. While the price many seem generous, many residents say it barely compensates for the cost of moving to new communities, finding new jobs, and buying other homes." Barry's article (122)

³³ Effects of MTR are explored in Fox's article

³⁴ Light's book details a person similar to Stanley who believes that West Virginia is detrimentally affected by MTR and who wishes to end this practice. (128)

³⁵ "Majority of mountaintop removal operations are non-union." Nida's article (13)

³⁶ Reference to Fox's article about effects on employment of MTR

³⁷ Motivation to save the mountain is often inspired by the history of the mountain, detailed in Scott's book. (143)

³⁸ Anti-MTR activists are wearing red bandanas similar to the union miners in 1921, Nida's article (10)

³⁹ Many community members are fighting to maintain the mountain as a reminder of the battle. Nida's article (20)

⁴⁰ Reference to Fox's article about the effects on employment from MTR

Virginia.⁴¹ Louis acts in the interest of West Virginians as he shows the world how advanced West Virginia truly is. By employing futuristic technologies, West Virginia will become the seat of advancement.

Louis believes in the power of coal. MTR provides the country with coal and energy. Because of an increase in demand for cheap energy across the country, Louis believes in innovations that will allow West Virginia to take full advantage of the country's needs. Louis is acting in the interest of all West Virginians when he sells their wares across the country for money that goes straight into the West Virginia economy.⁴²

Louis is a "good ol' country boy." He was raised in a very poor coal town, and he is familiar with the plights of his fellow countrymen. Despite a poor upbringing, Louis pulled himself out of poverty and eventually rose to the position of CEO of his company. Louis believes that if this type of accomplishment was possible for him, it is possible for any West Virginians, especially those employed in his mines.

The benefits of his hard work do not end with becoming CEO of his company. Louis is now a powerful force in West Virginia politics, as he pays off judges to support legislation that will not benefit his MTR mining practices. Louis is only looking out for his West Virginia countrymen as he continues to provide them with jobs for the future. Louis believes firmly in the mantra that "God put coal in the ground so that he could mine it, and anyone — or any law — that stands in his way needs to be beaten down, bought off or tied up in court."⁴³ Therefore, mining productively and at an ever-increasing rate means success not only for Louis and his bank account but also for his fellow West Virginians.

Louis believes that while MTR might be detrimental to the environment, the environmental destruction and carbon releases of Russia and China far surpass any sort of actions that he is enacting. Once these two countries begin to limit their carbon releases and start being ecologically responsible, Louis will think about doing the same. In the meantime, he will continue to mine coal to give back to the state that he so cares for.⁴⁴

Louis also speaks out adamantly about his support for his workers. He is staunchly anti-union, which often means that his workers do not get benefits such as a lunch hour or overtime pay.⁴⁵ Louis covers this up with his belief that he is striving ultimately for his workers by providing them with honest work and wages. Louis tends to believe that if he is able to pull himself out of his poverty then it is possible for anyone that is willing to work as hard as he did.

Scenario

Participants in the debate will each be given a position to argue based on the characters detailed above. They will then have to articulate their arguments as they answer the following questions. By looking at the issue through multiple lenses and hearing other participants' views, students should gain knowledge about the difficulty of enacting change regarding MTR. It is a multi-layered issue that presents many varying viewpoints regarding both the issue and possible solutions.

⁴¹ Interaction between technology and progress is detailed in Scott's book. (67)

⁴² "In the past 20 years, the U.S. demand for electricity increased 70%." From Fox's article, *Mountaintop Removal in West Virginia*, (168)

⁴³ Quote from Rolling Stone Article about CEO of Massey Energy, Don Blankenship. The character of Louis Smith is loosely based on Blankenship

⁴⁴ Blankenship has used the argument about Russia and China before in his defense against being environmentally unfriendly. From Rolling Stone article

⁴⁵ Workers in non-union mines often do not get lunch breaks or paid for overtime work. From Scott's book. (190)

Debate Questions

1. Should the practice of mountaintop removal be continued? Why or why not?
2. If another type of mining was utilized, such a deep shaft mining, instead of MTR mining, would this be a viable alternative solution?
3. Do the negative effects on the environment and the communities, associated with MTR mining, outweigh the positive economic benefits of having a viable industry in the area?
4. How should the government intervene or react to this situation?
5. What is your proposed solution to the issue of mountaintop removal in the Blair Mountain community?

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