

# LIGHTS OUT: TEN MYTHS ABOUT (AND REAL SOLUTIONS TO) AMERICA'S ENERGY CRISIS

by Spencer Abraham (with William Tucker), St. Martin's Press 2010

Reviewed by Jay Matson

Former United States Senator and Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham is following the same path that so many other politicians before him have chosen after leaving office – writing a book. Unlike many others, however, *Lights Out* is not a gossipy tell-all or a behind-the-scenes look at the political machinery of Washington (though he does offer anecdotes to lend some credence to his points). Rather, Secretary Abraham takes on the daunting task of developing a plausible energy policy designed to reduce greenhouse gases and reliance on foreign energy supplies, while making sure the lights do not go out. His case may not be as compelling as it could be. Perhaps it is impossible to present a compelling case for any solution. It is nonetheless a good starting point for a discussion that needs to occur if the United States is going to pursue a rational and deliberate energy policy before a crisis forces difficult choices.

In very readable prose, but a somewhat disorganized approach, Secretary Abraham makes the case that the United States should aim for a fuel mix by 2030 that includes 30% nuclear, 25% natural gas, 20% renewables (including hydro), 10% efficiency gains, and 5% clean coal (presumably, the remaining 10% will be traditional “dirty” coal.) This proposal differs from relatively recent studies done by the Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI) and McKinsey & Company (McKinsey) in certain respects.<sup>1</sup> For example, Secretary Abraham would encourage more nuclear development, as compared to the EPRI (28%) and McKinsey (24%) studies,<sup>2</sup> and he would rely less on renewables (EPRI forecasts 21%, McKinsey 23%).<sup>3</sup> Overall, however, his proposal generally trends in the same direction.<sup>4</sup>

Secretary Abraham's proposal is presented in four subparts. In Part 1, “Energy Myths and Facts,” Secretary Abraham briefly describes the ten myths that were offered as the teaser in the book's subtitle. These myths run the gamut from the obvious (“Global Warming is a Complete Hoax”) to the more sophisticated (“We Are Entering an Age of Natural Gas . . . and It Will Largely Solve Our Energy Problems”). In attacking these myths, Secretary Abraham removes many of the roadblocks that can undermine the development of a sound, comprehensive energy policy, and thereby sets the stage for a more productive discussion in the rest of the book.

In Part 2, “Threats to Our Energy And Environmental Security,” Secretary Abraham describes the problems confronting the United States in the energy

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1. See Jonathan D. Schneider, *So, the World Is Getting Warmer: What Now? New Literature on Electric Sector Options and the Cost of Climate Control Legislation*, 30 ENERGY L.J. 553 (2009).

2. *Id.* at 555.

3. *Id.*

4. Perhaps the most notable difference is EPRI and McKinsey each predicted substantially lower reliance on natural gas. More recent developments regarding the ability to extract gas from shale cost effectively suggest that Secretary Abraham's projection is probably more realistic under current assumptions.

sector, including the inability of supply to keep up with the ever-increasing demand for more electricity, geopolitical instability, and the impact of power production on the environment. For a reader that does not already think there is an increasingly critical need to develop a rational, practical, comprehensive energy policy in this country, that point is driven home here.

In Part 3, “Why We Have Failed to Address Our Energy Security Threats,” Secretary Abraham takes the political process to task. As he correctly observes, “mistakes have been made on all sides,” including the Bush Administration (in which Secretary Abraham served), Congress, the media, environmental activists, and the general public. Past mistakes are identified, presumably, so they can be avoided in the future, and to ensure that a new workable energy policy is not dead on arrival. However, it is not entirely clear that any solution will be available to traverse the minefield of politics, schizophrenic infatuation with unproven quick fixes, and rampant NIMBY-ism.

Parts 1-3, which comprise the first half of the book, are the prologue. Part 4 is where the proposed solution and the underlying rationale are described. Secretary Abraham concludes that nuclear and clean coal are the only viable options to reduce foreign reliance, reduce greenhouse gases and not suffer significant price shock. Renewables have environmental consequences of their own, especially their need for large amounts of land to support plants on a commercial scale. Most of the good hydro resources are already tapped. Energy efficiency measures will not reduce demand much. All of these propositions are debatable, but the debate needs to start.

*Lights Out* does suffer from several flaws. While the overall organizational structure makes sense, the book has a tendency to meander from one topic to another and back again. The flow of the discussion often skirts a topic to the point of distraction. Rather than delving into the topic thoroughly where it naturally arises, the reader is told that the topic will be revisited later in the book.

Secretary Abraham strives for an apolitical analysis of the issues, but sprinkled throughout the book are criticisms with a rhetorical tone that is unnecessary and reminds the reader that he has been involved in politics, in an increasingly partisan Washington, for many years.

The approach used when addressing the value of new nuclear plants versus renewable resources leaves the reader to wonder whether Secretary Abraham brought a bias to his analysis. For example, Secretary Abraham would have the federal government heavily subsidize development of 50 new nuclear units over the next 20 years. In an era when President Obama is vocally criticized (rightly or wrongly) as being a socialist, and there is widespread resentment of the government’s takeover of certain business during the recent economic turmoil, Secretary Abraham makes no meaningful attempt to explain how he would begin to make heavy subsidization of the nuclear industry politically palatable.

Most disturbing, Secretary Abraham waits until the reader is more than two-thirds of the way into the book to mention that he has relationships with certain segments of the industry, which he also supports vigorously. Even the appearance of potential favoritism or a conflict of interest should be addressed up front so that the reader can consider not only the argument, but the author’s potential motivations.

Ultimately, what Secretary Abraham offers is a modest step forward. The argument may have been better organized, a little less rhetorical, and a bit more

optimistic, but all-in-all, it is a good start. For a quick, high-level read that highlights many of the critical energy decisions that the United States faces, industry insiders and lay persons alike should pick up *Lights Out* and start thinking about the difficult choices ahead.