The United States of Gas: Why the Shale Revolution Could Have Happened Only in America

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**Abstract (summary)**

Natural gas has been a godsend for the US. Already, gas has spurred a manufacturing renaissance, with investors spending and planning hundreds of billions of dollars on new facilities such as chemical, steel, and aluminum plants. The shale boom has created hundreds of thousands of new high-paying, middle-class jobs, and now, more than one million Americans work in the oil and gas industry. As much as other countries may envy this catalyst for domestic growth, they will not be able to replicate it, because only the US possesses the unique ingredients necessary to fully develop shale resources. A legal system that enshrines the private ownership of land and the resources below it, along with open capital markets and a reasonable regulatory system, has led to the growth of thousands of independent oil and gas companies, all of which are in intense competition with one another.

**Full Text**

Less than a decade ago, the future of American energy looked bleak. Domestic production of both oil and gas was dwindling, and big U.S. energy companies, believing their fortunes lay offshore, had long since turned away from the mainland. But then something remarkable occurred: a surge of innovation allowed companies to extract vast quantities of natural gas trapped in once-inaccessible deposits of shale. The resulting abundance drove down U.S. gas prices to about one-third of the global average.

Natural gas has been a godsend for the United States. Already, gas has spurred a manufacturing renaissance, with investors spending and planning hundreds of billions of dollars on new facilities such as chemical, steel, and aluminum plants. The shale boom has created hundreds of thousands of new high-paying, middle-class jobs, and now, more than one million Americans work in the oil and gas industry—an increase of roughly 40 percent between 2007 and 2012. Moreover, because natural gas currently supplies about 25 percent of the total energy consumed in the United States (a figure that is rapidly growing), the boom is saving U.S. consumers hundreds of billions of dollars a year. Combined with the other benefits, those savings have given the United States a long-term economic advantage over its competitors and helped the country recover from the Great Recession.

As much as other countries may envy this catalyst for domestic growth, they will not be able to replicate it, because only the United States possesses the unique ingredients necessary to fully develop shale resources. A legal system that enshrines the private ownership of land and the resources below it, along with open capital markets and a reasonable regulatory system, has led to the growth of thousands of independent oil and gas companies, all of which are in intense competition with one another. As a result, nearly four million oil and gas wells have been drilled in the United States, versus 1.5 million in the rest of the world. The bustle of drilling activity in the United States has also led to increases in innovation within the industry on an order of magnitude that other countries can only dream of.

Although other places, such as China and Europe, have substantial shale resources, they don’t have the entrepreneur-friendly system needed to develop those resources quickly and productively. So long as politicians don’t get in the way, then, the United States will profit handsomely from the shale revolution for decades to come.

**BEHIND THE BOOM**

The story of America’s shale revolution involves classic Yankee ingenuity—although not on the part of big oil. Beginning in the 1970s, production from onshore U.S. oil and gas fields declined as those fields became what the industry calls “mature.” So the major oil companies were forced to abandon the development of new resources on U.S. soil. In order to find giant new oil fields, they shifted their exploration efforts to remote foreign lands and deep offshore waters. Such investments were enormously expensive and often required decades to negotiate and develop. In order to build the capital resources and global reach necessary to deal with national governments and complete mammoth projects, the major oil companies began to acquire or merge with their peers. Oil, they recognized, was usually cheaper to buy on Wall Street than find in the ground.

Over the next few decades, however, these companies became excessively bureaucratic and developed tunnel vision. Focused principally on replacing their dwindling oil reserves, they invested their capital in giant foreign deposits, such as the Kashagan field, in Kazakhstan, which has an estimated 13 billion barrels of recoverable oil; its first phase of development alone cost $50 billion.

Meanwhile, smaller, independent companies—which earn the lion’s share of their revenue at the wellhead and little of it downstream (at the refining stage, for example)—were forced to innovate or die. Beginning in the late 1990s, natural gas prices were climbing, and the companies were learning that the United States’ underground shale formations contained vast volumes of natural gas. So such firms as the ghk Companies (of which I am the founder and CEO) attempted to crack open the shale in vertical wells and release the gas by injecting sand, water, and chemicals into the rock, a process known as hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking.” But it simply wasn’t profitable.

Then, George Mitchell, an independent oil man wildcatting in the Barnett formation, in Texas, began to break the code. His innovation was to drill horizon-
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The shale revolution has its naysayers, who point to the cyclical nature of natural gas prices in the past to argue that future price spikes could render the fuel unreliable and costly. But past volatility resulted from stringent government price controls followed by a complex process of deregulation and from the high risk involved in exploring for pockets of conventional natural gas. In other words, prices were subject to both the vagaries of national policy and the complexities of subsurface geology.

Neither of those problems exists today, since price controls were abandoned long ago and U.S. companies now know exactly where vast quantities of accessible natural gas lie, and so the extraction of gas is a reliable manufacturing process rather than a crapshoot. The future price of natural gas will be determined not so much by the size of the supplies of gas found, as was the case with conventional natural gas, as by the manufacturing cost of extraction. Prices, therefore, should stay steady in the long run, possibly even for the next half century. They may even fall as the industry continues to lower costs and improve productivity at the wellhead. Additional innovation downstream—in the transportation, distribution, and consumption sectors—has not yet even truly begun. When it does, efficiency gains will generate billions of dollars more in consumer savings.

The bottom line is that thanks to the shale revolution, the United States has already insulated itself from unpredictable fluctuations in global natural gas prices and is coming close to doing so in terms of oil prices. Domestic oil shortages due to foreign natural disasters or political disruptions could someday become a thing of the past, particularly if natural gas starts fueling U.S. cars and trucks. Growing energy independence will give Washington a leg up on its competitors. Should the flow of oil be threatened by some event in the Middle East, such as the fall of the Saudi regime, the United States will be able to weather the storm better than any other large economy.

Cheap and abundant natural gas adds to the country’s geopolitical capital in a more direct way: it significantly strengthens the U.S. economy. Americans pay a fraction of the price for natural gas that the rest of the world’s consumers do, saving as much as $300 billion annually compared with consumers in China and Europe. Already, the development of the United States’ enormous shale oil and gas reserves has boosted U.S. GDP by as much as one percent. In fact, with the growing oil and gas revolution, the U.S. economy would likely have slipped back into recession and added hundreds of thousands of fewer jobs. Today, most of the states enjoying the shale boom have lower levels of joblessness than the national average: thanks to drilling in the Bakken formation, for example, North Dakota’s unemployment rate is only 2.6 percent, the lowest in the country. The United States’ growing economic advantage could last until the middle of this century or beyond.

Unless, that is, it is squandered. In California and New York, two of the country’s largest economies, anti-fracking activists and state politicians have managed to slow the development of shale resources to a snail’s pace. Both states contain large shale formations (the Monterey in California and the Marcellus in New York), the development of which would provide a major boost to both state and national economic growth. Politicians need to recognize that today America has an unprecedented opportunity for long-term economic growth that can generate good middle-class jobs, help it leave the Great Recession behind for good, and grant it geopolitical advantages over its competitors for decades to come. It would be a shame not to seize it.

Born to a family of Oklahoma oil men, ROBERT HEFNER earned a geology degree from the University of Oklahoma in 1957 and went on to pioneer ultra-deep natural gas exploration, drilling some of the world’s deepest wells and unlocking reserves 30,000 feet below the earth’s surface. Today, he is the owner of the GHK Companies, an oil and gas firm based in Oklahoma City, as well as an author, philanthropist, and collector of modern Chinese art. In "The United States of Gas" (page 9), he explains why the shale revolution could have taken off only in the United States.