



Reflections on "The Prize"

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The PBS Series based on "The Prize" was made in 1993, just after the first Gulf War. The final episode, which I have just watched, dealt with a look, from that time, into the future and the 21st Century. Some 13 years later it is interesting to watch that tape and see where we have, and have not, made progress.

The final episode dwelt much more on the impact of the oil economy on the environment than on the history of the industry, which was the original point of the book and the focus of the earlier seven episodes. A somewhat younger Jeremy Leggett discussed the threats that oil and the pollution that it caused held for the future of the world. (The burning oilfields of Kuwait provided a dramatic emphasis). White Knights was the only Western Oil Company drilling in Siberia, to help the Former Soviet Union bring back its oil industry, one that was in truly bad shape. (And the cooperation of the native tribes of the Yamal Peninsula could be had for the price of 10 snowmobiles. How times have changed !) And the then Chairman of Shell, the largest oil company at the time, promised that they would be around for a long time into the future. There was just one, almost missed, reference to the fact that, as American oil had peaked, so would world oil production. It came from the past President of ARCO, and was given no real emphasis in the program.

Out of curiosity I went and looked at the back of the book "The Prize" itself. The environmental issues take about 3 pages at the end of the 788 pages. So times have changed over the past few years. There is a wealth of detail in the book that is, by its nature and brevity, missing from the video presentation. And yet that gives a glimpse of how we got from where the oil industry started to that time. 13 years ago, where it was anticipated to be able to go on for more than 50 years into the future.

In terms of vision the impacts of China were largely missing, and the growing economy of India got hardly a mention. I remember those discussions. The video captured them, the conjectural impact of Chinese demand for cars, and the subsequent increase in their use of oil. It had an air of unreality in the discussions we had, and the tape scarcely gave it more credibility, and yet, here we are, now facing the reality of that growth in demand.

We have, I suspect, largely forgotten the problems that we had back in the '70's when oil supplies were limited and the President of the United States made a point of addressing the nation while wearing a sweater. Certainly, listening to Daniel Yergin, who provided some of the commentary, discussing the collapse of the oil prices and the cyclic nature of the industry, one gets some inkling of where CERA gets some of its motivation. It is reflective of the industry itself, one that has seen boom and bust come time and again.

But the frontiers are running out, the saviors of the North Sea and the North Slope are now

reaching exhaustion. So far the Eastern Siberian promise, held out at the end of the tapes, has not proven to be there for oil, although certainly there is gas out there to be had (though still not yet fully developed).

The chill breeze down our backs that reminds us that it was the 20th Century that was the time of oil, not this one, was not blowing then. Since the series is now rather hard to find (I got mine as a used copy via a store affiliated with Amazon) and rather expensive, I have to say that I will keep it as a historic souvenir. It contains a number of interviews with people of the time that present a picture of the thinking of the period. But the book is much more informative, if a little dense in information to make it, for me anyway, an easy read. But it has much more value and I do recommend it, if you haven't got a copy.



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