

Book Review: Cape Wind -- Money, Celebrity, Class, Politics, and the Battle for Our Energy Future on Nantucket Sound.

By Eric Olson

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It is increasingly apparent that America must build its future on renewable energy. Global warming is a clear and present danger, and conventional fuels are dirty, limited, and increasingly costly. But a book about a controversy like Cape Wind will generate no renewable energy except indirectly, by swaying hearts and minds. Perhaps I am too much the scientist, but I like scoring points with data, not with sarcasm or ridicule. This book was too focused on personalities for my liking, and some compelling facts about Cape Wind were given short shrift.



This Vestas turbine powers the street lights of Hull, MA. (photo by Doug Welch)

Williams, a free-lance writer who lives on Cape Cod, and Whitcomb, editorial-page editor of The Providence Journal, are skilled journalists who attended countless

meetings, interviewed key people, and sifted through the vast paper wake that has churned for some six years now around this renewable energy mega-project. The basic facts: entrepreneur Jim Gordon has requested permission to construct 130 towering wind turbines, with a “nameplate” capacity of nearly half a gigawatt. A typical nuclear plant has a capacity of about twice that, and (unlike the wind) runs nearly non-stop. Nevertheless, Cape Wind would produce truly clean power and run most of the Cape and Islands much of the time. It is not America’s first effort at large wind; Texas beat us to that, but it is the first large offshore project. Unfortunately, Mr. Gordon could not have chosen a more challenging shore to build off of.

Ted Kennedy is only the most famous of Cape Wind opponents to live along the southern shore of Cape Cod. Add names like Mellon, DuPont, Jack Welch of GE fame, and lesser-known industry captains from Reebok, Phelps Dodge, and Fidelity. These are hyper-rich people with a wealth of connections and drive. When Gordon and his project came into their sights, an intense battle began that has left both sides looking ridiculous at times.

The opposition looks ridiculous because they have so little to say beyond “what an outrage!” At bottom they just do not want their horizon besmirched by distant towers by day or lights by night. Never mind that the view is already besmirched by distant masts by day and boats that blink at night. Never mind the occasional yellow haze of pollution, or that the waters of Buzzards Bay are contaminated by a legacy of oil spills. It is true that the view will change, and for some people the view is the thing. Sailing, sometimes in the fog, is also part of their lives, and now there may be added anxiety of a steel tower looming suddenly into view. But weigh these against a national need to change course on energy! For most people there is simply no contest.

The pro-wind forces look ridiculous because they seem so stunned by the rage of the opposition. Hindsight is 20/20, but Jim Gordon is a smart guy, and he has had to fight NIMBY power plant fights before. Surely he has thought hard in recent years about how to make future projects less divisive, but the authors did not ask him such tough questions. Maybe the fight truly was inevitable. Its also ridiculous, though, to gloss over facts about the energy context of Cape Wind. Contrary to what is implied in the book, not even a mega-wind farm will make a dent in pollution, given that electricity demand is rising in our region by over 1% a year. Power grid overseers support Cape Wind not because they hope to close dirty plants, but because they are hungry for power of any sort. The terrible truth is, even as we drive hybrids and change our light bulbs, we are building our houses bigger and snapping up large screen TV’s. Cape Wind opponents are correct: it is not the answer to our energy/climate crisis. But this argument rings hollow from people whose personal carbon footprints are off the charts.

Though Cape Wind is not “the answer”, not building it is even worse. This book is not meant to be a treatise on technical aspects of wind power, so please don’t let it be all you read on the issue. For starters, view a national wind map at <http://rredc.nrel.gov/wind/pubs/atlas/maps/chap2/2-01m.html>. You’ll see that Cape Cod is the only spot along the entire eastern seaboard where the wind resource reaches truly outstanding heights. Opponents are eager to suggest other favorable locations, and the correct response is “yes to those places too”. But a convergence of

pure gold wind resource, shallow shoal, and determined advocate is a precious rarity. Cape Wind was meant to be. I wish the authors had included more on these basic truths, and our larger energy quagmire, in their useful but angry portrayal of an even angrier anti-wind opposition.