

Taking No Prisoners

Power, Energy, and Black America

Posted: 01 Jan 2010 09:00 PM PST

By Roger Witherspoon

In a sense, it could fairly be said to have begun with patent number 252,386, issued January 17, 1882 to a young Black inventor named Lewis Howard Latimer.

Latimer, the only inventor to work with both of America's icons of modern technological development – Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell – patented the carbon filament which made the electric light bulb possible. By bringing high intensity light to the factory floor, Latimer revolutionized the world's candle-lit manufacturing sector, turning production into round the clock operations. Latimer would go on to develop the process for manufacturing vacuum-packed light bulbs and the procedure for stepping up voltage, thus making it possible to light Broadway and then the cities of London and Toronto.

Like most of the contributions of Blacks to the development of the modern, technological society, the innovative work in the complex energy infrastructure has been, and remains, largely unknown. That is one reason why many Black Americans feel they have no stake in the current debate over the nation's future energy policy or the environmental and economic implications of different energy technologies. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In the view of Frank Stewart, energy and the environment are the most important issues facing the African American community of today and tomorrow. These fields hold the keys to economic development, education, and job opportunity and, in the end, survival.

“The underlying reason for the civil rights movement of the 60s was to give everybody the best chance for the best future they could possibly have,” said Stewart, President and Chief Operating Officer of the American Association of Blacks in Energy (www.AABE.org). “It all becomes moot if the economics don't work. What we are looking at now is as much a human and civil rights issue as anything we went through in the 60s.

“And highlighting the role minorities play in these areas is important. It tells young people that they can have a viable, exciting, rewarding career and you are not a nerd just because you are interested in math and science.”

Stewart has a longer perspective than most. A physicist and psychologist by training, he moved into the public policy arena in 1971, as Assistant Secretary for Education and civil Rights in the US Department of Education. In 1975 Hazel O’Leary, then with the Federal Energy Administration, asked him to move to the Department of energy to head their new Office of State Energy and Policy Programs – a special directorate charged with helping the states and territories develop balanced energy portfolios and programs to provide energy services to their citizens. This was just after the first of the “energy shocks” resulting from the Arab oil embargo, which focused American attention on our energy mix. He was to stay in government for 30 years, moving in 1994 to run DOE’s renewable energy research programs out of Colorado.

“If ever there was a time where we are looking at the potential for major change and enormous business opportunities – more so than at the time of the development of transistors in the 40s; more so than the advent of television in the 50s; more so than the time of cell phones – than it is the current period of energy,” said Stewart.

“We are looking at a time where there is a world-wide panoply of industries all going through changes, and the entrepreneur with his eyes forward and head on straight can really take off.

“The needs in terms of energy and the environment could arguable be considered more important and more difficult than Kennedy’s 1960 charge to put a man on the moon. The current drive involves the whole world, not just the US. It involves not just the technological tinker toys which are fun and exciting, but literally involves the survival of the planet. It is not just looking at the mechanics of flight and the survival of man in those conditions, but looking at issues of much, much greater breadth and much, much greater complexity.

“There are enormous impacts that these issues have for the Black community.”

It is more important than ever for Black Americans to get involved in the energy debate, he said. Up to 70 percent of African American households earn less than \$50,000 annually, and spend 25% or more of their income on energy – a higher percentage than they pay for health care or education.

And, as always, Blacks have been involved in setting energy policy, providing pivotal R&D and, on the ground, running the companies powering the nation’s homes and industries.

The widely touted “nuclear renaissance” can’t take placed without going through the desk

of Victor McCree of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, who is evaluating the plans for the next generation of commercial nuclear reactors; and the nation's position as the world's primary super power would be hollow without Dr. Kevin Greenaugh, who designs and maintains the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile.

The debate on climate change could not take place without the work of Dr. Warren Washington, Director of the National Center for Atmospheric Research who, for the past 30 years, has pioneered development of global climate models which underlie all computerized atmospheric research.

Washington, (<http://www.ncar.ucar.edu/>) an adviser to President Obama and the Congressional Black Caucus on climate issues, said "we have to watch for the impact of climate mitigation measures on minority communities.

"If you look at coal plants in places like Mississippi and Louisiana, for example, they are most likely to have been sited in Black communities. If you are looking to capture their pollutants, or do a better job scrubbing their exhausts, we have to watch what happens to those compounds to make sure they are not further contaminating the water and areas around them.

"If the projects are not handled properly they could have a disproportionately negative impact on the surrounding Black communities."

And on the ground, if there is a flood or nuclear accident, it is up to Roxanne Lamb of the US Geological Survey, (rhilamb@usgs.gov) to provide the data showing all terrestrial systems which are likely to be affected, and the disparate government agencies which need to be mobilized to deal with some aspect of the calamity.

Then, there are people like George Williams, Senior Vice President for Nuclear Operations at ComEd, (<http://www.exeloncorp.com/>), Thomas Graham, President of PEPCO (<http://www.pepco.com/home/>); and Darryl Stokes, Vice President of Baltimore Gas & Electric, (<http://www.bge.com/portal/site/bge/>) running companies bringing electricity to nearly 2 million homes; or Ralph Cleveland, Vice President of Atlanta Gas Light (RCleve@AGLresources.com), and Sherri Winslow, Vice President of Entergy New Orleans, (swinslo@entergy.com), providing natural gas through good times and through hurricane flood waters.

These are but a few of the Black Americans who, in this era of change, have their hands on the power affecting us all.