

Introduction



ON THIS JUNE DAY in 2009 the West Virginia mountains watched quietly as mortals squabbled over their fate. Along the scorching hot asphalt of state highway 3 next to the Massey coal processing plant, flanked by officers holding nightsticks, anti-mountaintop removal protesters walked toward the plant gate to deliver a letter to coal baron Don Blankenship. In the south lane a German shepherd police dog, its leash gripped by an officer, snarled menacingly while its handler shouted at passers-by to step back. Across the road, a crowd of sweating, red-faced coal miners shouted threats and obscenities and chanted “Massey! Massey!” Suddenly a shrieking woman emerged, striking one of the demonstrators in the face before being seized by police.

In the eye of the turbulence the world’s most prominent climate scientist, Dr. James Hansen, stood calmly as police officers cinched plastic handcuffs onto his wrists and placed him in a patrol car. For a time the car remained motionless, held in check by the packed throng; then it slowly pushed its way up the road toward the county detention center.

Earlier in the day, Dr. Hansen had delivered a speech in which he stated that climate change, left unchecked, would drive half or more of all the species of plants and animals on

Planet Earth into extinction. The rally had been invaded by dozens of miners who had been given the day off to heckle the speakers. Arriving on loud motorcycles, many with body-builder physiques and shaved heads, the miners had formed an intimidating wall directly behind the speakers' platform. They shouted insults, unplugged the power cord to the sound equipment, and set off air horns directly into the ears of bluegrass musicians entertaining the rally. When 94-year-old Ken Hechler, a former congressman and West Virginia secretary of state, told the rally about his decades-long efforts to halt mountaintop removal, the miners shouted at him to get back into his wheelchair.

As I watched these scenes of chaos, it was obvious what motivated both sides of the controversy. On one side were West Virginians whose families had long treasured these beautiful mountains, in some cases for over two hundred years. Most Americans, faced with the destruction of their homes, would fight just as hard. On the other side were workers who feared for their livelihoods and their families. Though they had been manipulated into serving as thugs for an unscrupulous corporate boss, their personal concerns were no less valid.

But the head of climate research for NASA? Here was an insider with consummate access to the halls of federal power. Why should such an individual find it necessary to come to an obscure town in West Virginia and face an angry mob, just to deliver a letter? Was the message really so urgent? What is about coal—just one among many sources of pollution—that would motivate a climate scientist to go to jail? Why had a movement coalesced around these issues, and what had that movement accomplished so far?

These are the questions that this book attempts to explore.

