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Aspen Provides Panoramic View of Energy Issues

The Energy Revolution track at the Aspen Ideas Festival provided a unique vantage point for understanding the energy landscape.

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The Aspen Ideas Festival is known for its challenging intellectual terrain, but the physical terrain of Aspen is a powerful part of the experience, too. This is especially true for those who were here during the past week to learn more about our energy future.

A gondola ride to the top Mount Aspen (known by the locals as Ajax) opens up breathtaking vistas of mountains and valleys in the Elk Mountains, reminding you of the incredible geological forces that took place over millennia to thrust up these mountains and then wear them down.

And as you scan the snow-topped peaks on the horizon and try to wrap your head around the geologic timescale, you can't help think about how the energy choices we make today will affect the earth over the millennia to come. The views stay with you as you go from session to session, listening to experts talking about clean energy, renewables, carbon capture and climate change.

Exploring the local terrain also requires constant shifts in perspective. Ajax seems impressive enough, especially to a visiting flatlander, but then you have to readjust your scale of "how tall is tall" when you glimpse the majesty of fourteeners (mountains over 14,000 feet, like the nearby Maroon Bells).

When it comes to thinking about the future of energy, the intellectual experience is similar. You think you've got a grasp on the big picture, and then the picture gets bigger. Luckily, the Energy Revolution track offered expert guides who helped make the topic accessible to the average citizen who cares about the issues.

One of those guides was Michael Levi, David M. Rubenstein senior fellow for energy and the environment at the Council on Foreign Relations and director of the Council's [program](#) on Energy Security and Climate Change

Levi took part in a Friday session on "Powering Tomorrow," and then returned on Sunday morning for a conversation drawing on his recently published book, *The Power Surge: Energy, Opportunity, and the Battle for America's Future*. He was interviewed by Meghan L. O'Sullivan, director of [Harvard's Geopolitics of Energy Project](#), who also moderated an earlier [panel](#) on "Inventing the Future."

Levi's book, released in April, is a must-read for anyone interested in our energy future. O'Sullivan described it as a "wonderful book that does what very few books do: it integrates economics, security and environment," and pointed to a favorable review in *The Economist* that called Levi the first storyteller of this energy revolution.

What Levi offered the audience, which was typical of all the Energy Revolution sessions, was an informed, thoughtful voice that helped provide some clarity. He took very complex, technical subjects and helped an audience of non-experts see the energy landscape through his eyes.

For instance, Levi cautioned against boosterism about the oil and natural gas booms the U.S. is experiencing. He explained that for every new job in oil industry, you get a multiplier effect, with lots of other related jobs. The obvious flip side of that: when oil production goes down, jobs get pulled down.


He recounted that when he started doing some research on what would happen if oil fell, he was told by some people: "now is not the time to be looking at downsides." Levi's angle: When things are going well, that's precisely the time to be considering potential downsides. This perspective connected back to the Saturday

morning session featuring two very different [scenarios](#) of the energy future developed by Shell. The scenarios are not meant to predict the future, but to establish boundaries for what's possible.

This kind of mapping of the territory--looking at what we're dealing with now, where we need to go from here, and what the possible paths might be--is what made the Energy Revolution track especially engaging and valuable. And of course there were many voices in the conversation and the viewpoints ran the gamut, from executives and entrepreneurs, to engineers and scientists, to policy experts and environmentalists--including many panelists who have worn multiple energy hats.

The depth and breadth of our global energy system and its many complexities may still be daunting and difficult to grasp. But from start to finish, the Energy Revolution track brought together an incredible group of guides to help us get our bearings in some challenging terrain.

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