

# Oiling the wheels of war

**T**he British and United States governments are keen for us to believe that a war on Iraq is just and necessary: it is to overcome a threat to world peace and to end the rule of a brutal dictator.

This information sheet starts from the assumption that the arguments for war are unconvincing – after all nothing has changed in Iraq, or its actions, to suddenly propel it into the world’s headlines. So why are the British and US governments so keen to pursue a war, and why now?

Part of the answer lies in oil.

## The importance of oil

America has a problem. It uses a vast and increasing proportion of the world’s oil, and needs to import larger and larger amounts to do so.

America also has a ‘solution’ – ensure that you keep control over the world’s major oil producing region.

As Brigadier General William Looney, head of the US Central Command’s Airborne Expeditionary Force and the man in charge of enforcing the ‘no fly zone’ in southern Iraq, told the Washington Post when talking about Iraq in 1996:

*“They know we own their country. We own their airspace... We dictate the way they live and talk. And that’s what’s great about America right now. It’s a good thing, especially when there’s a lot of oil out there we need. Washington Post, June 24 1996*

Attempting to control the world to suit its own needs is not a new policy .

It has been the US position since it became the dominant world power at the end of World War 2.

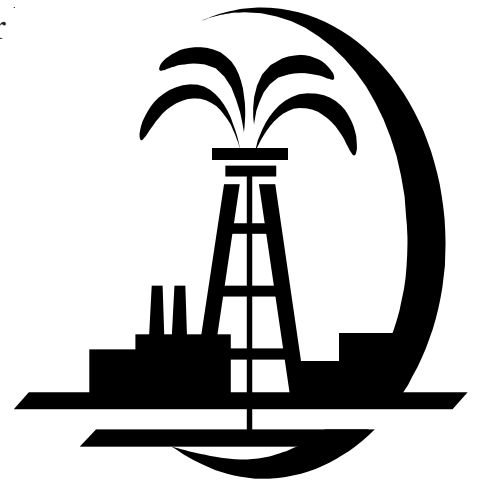
Fifty years ago George Kennan, Head of the U.S. State Department Policy Planning Staff was arguing in an internal memo:

*“We have about 60% of the world’s wealth but only 6.3% of its population.... Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity.”  
24th February 1948*

Government motives are often murky and sometimes, as they respond to different pressures on them, contradictory. But it is against this background that we have to see the actions of the US government and their junior partner Britain.

## Wanted – More oil and cheaper oil

The United States is by far the biggest consumer of oil in the world. It currently uses a quarter of the total consumed worldwide.



In recent years it has come increasingly to rely on imports, which account for more than half its total use. US use is expected to rise by almost a third by 2020.

On the other hand the Gulf contains the largest reserves of oil in the world. On current figures Saudi Arabia has 30% of world reserves followed by Iraq with 13%. When you add in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Iran then this area holds three quarters of the world’s reserve.

In addition, as Spencer Abraham, Bush’s Secretary of Energy pointed out to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations:

*“Middle Eastern oil also has the lowest production costs in the world.”*

This poses a central problem for the United States. In the short term greater co-operation among these states could increase the price of oil. In the longer term Arab states that put their own interests before that of the west could threaten US access to what it regards as a vital resource.

## Oil Wars

The danger of Arabs controlling their own oil resources has not gone unnoticed by the US government. Indeed for half a century it has pursued policies to counter it.

In the case of the Middle East this led to clandestine missions in the region, operations to overthrow legitimate governments and assassination attempts on heads of state.

It also led to the fermenting of a series of wars that were designed to keep Arab states fighting each other. The US aim was to undermine any attempt Arab states might make to unite to use their resources for their own benefit.

The most consistent examples of US involvement in the Middle East are their ongoing support for Israel, and their hostility to Libya.

Attesting to Israel's unique contribution to the US strategic agenda, former US Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, referred to Israel as the largest pro-US aircraft carrier, with the advantage of not requiring US personnel, and not being possible to sink.

*"It's been a leading, driving doctrine of US foreign policy since the 1940's that the vast and unparalleled energy resources of the Gulf region will be effectively dominated by the US and its clients"*

Noam Chomsky  
US author and academic

## Some examples of US involvement in the Middle East

### □ Iran 1953

Iranian Prime Minister Mossadegh was overthrown in a British-US joint operation. His policy of nationalising a British owned oil company had a large majority in the Iranian parliament but did not please the British. The Shah was restored to power initiating a 25 year dictatorship. The Iranian oil industry was restored to foreign ownership with Britain and the US getting 40 per cent each.

### □ Middle East 1956 – 58

During this period US President Eisenhower argued that the US had to be prepared to use force to 'protect' states in the Middle East from communist aggression. Between 1956 -58 the US twice tried to overthrow the Syrian government, held several shows of force in the Mediterranean to intimidate opponents to the US backed governments in Jordan and Lebanon, and conspired to overthrow or assassinate President Nasser of Egypt.

### □ Iraq 1962-63

In 1962 General Abdul Kassem, a moderate reformer who had overthrown the monarchy in 1958, created a national oil company to exploit the nation's oil. In February 1963 he was overthrown in a coup and executed. The US State Department announced that they were pleased the new regime was no longer interested in nationalizing the Iraq Petroleum Company. Papers from the British cabinet, later declassified, show the coup was backed by the British and the CIA.

### □ Iraq 1972-75

In 1972 Iran and Iraq were in dispute over the price of oil. President Nixon, as a favour to the pro-Western Shah of Iran, agreed \$16 million in military aid to Kurds fighting for autonomy in Iraq. The aim was to weaken Iraq by creating an unresolved internal conflict, rather than free the Kurds.

A 1974 CIA memo points out *"Iran, like ourselves, has seen benefit in a stalemate situation...Neither Iran nor ourselves wish to see the matter resolved one way or another."*

By 1975 Iraq was sufficiently weakened to toe the Iranian and western line. The US then lost interest in the Kurds and Kurdish forces were massacred and hundreds of their leaders executed. Nixon's National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, when questioned on this in the US Congress by the Pike Committee responded that *"Covert action should not be confused with missionary work."*

## The effect of September 11<sup>th</sup>

US fears were strongly sharpened by the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>. This was not because they believed Iraq was involved, but because the attacks demonstrated that the US grasp on the Middle East was much more unstable than they had thought.

### The role of Saudi Arabia

In particular the fact that several of the hijackers came from rich Saudi families, as did Bin Laden, exposed splits in Saudi Arabia.

This was crucial as Saudi Arabia, in addition to having the world's largest oil reserves, is the main US client in the region.

The Saudi royal family has been supported by the US in their feudal treatment of their people.

In return Saudi Arabia has performed various functions which are vital to US economic interests:-

- ✓ Allowed the location of US bases in their country
- ✓ Used their dominant position in OPEC to keep oil prices within a stable and relatively low range
- ✓ Served as a supplier of oil when other sources dried up due, for example, to the previous Gulf war. They keep massive stocks in reserve precisely for this reason.
- ✓ Recycled large amounts of the money that came into the country by using it to invest in US and British firms and to buy western luxury goods (rather than, for example, spending it on health or education within the country.)

The splits that have emerged in Saudi Arabia, and were exemplified by the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, pose the spectre of a Saudi Arabia that is less firmly under US control.

### The role war will play

A war with Iraq, while pushing up the price of oil in the short term, would (the US hopes) reestablish its dominance.

Specifically:-

- ✓ It would create a compliant Iraq, and bring Iraqi oil onto the world market.
- ✓ In addition a war-ravaged Iraq would need money as quickly as possible and would be under pressure to break from OPEC price agreements, thus undercutting the solidarity of oil producing states. As a recent article in The Economist put it:
 

*“If the flood of Iraqi oil continued indefinitely... the Saudis would have no choice but to abandon price... and go for volume instead.”*
- ✓ Even if Iraq did not break from OPEC an attack would be an object lesson to the Saudi rulers of what can happen to one-time allies who turn against the US.

Terror tactics are explicitly part of US doctrine. A 1995 study of ‘Post Cold War Deterrence’ by the US Strategic Command argues:

*“That the US may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked should be part of the national persona we project.”*

It is *“beneficial...if some elements may appear to be potentially ‘out of control’”*

*“Covert action should not be confused with missionary work.”*

*Henry Kissinger  
National Security Adviser  
to President Nixon*

*“If you look at our defense budget, just the cost of maintaining the oil supply lines from the Middle East at a minimum costs us over \$50 billion a year. That has to do with military emplacements that have been stationed in that part of the world, ships that patrol, planes that fly, et cetera”*

*Congresswoman Kaptur in a debate in Congress, during which she argued for more money for renewable energy sources*

## Oily money

Historically, US Governments have been deeply involved with oil interests.

George W. Bush and his allies have received more campaign contributions from oil companies than any other administration in history.

All told, oil and gas firms donated \$1,889,206 to Bush's presidential campaign, making the industry among the top ten special interest contributors to Bush in Election 2000.

Individuals connected with the oil industry contributed at least an additional \$85,500 to the Bush campaign.

The Bush Presidential Inaugural Committee received yet another \$1 million in contributions from oil and gas firms.

The oil and gas industry contributed at least \$556,700 to Bush's 1994 and 1998 campaigns for Governor of Texas.

Individuals connected with the industry contributed an additional \$944,733.

Of course, George W. Bush is not the only part of the US establishment that has benefited from the largess of the oil companies.

Exxon/Mobil Corp. spent \$3,280,216 to influence Congressional and Presidential campaigns from 1995 to 2000.

BP/Amoco Corp. spent \$2,989,073 during the same period.

Occidental Petroleum spent \$1,544,774 and Texaco Inc. spent \$1,272,585.

There are many additional ties between the oil industry and the Bush administration - indeed, both President Bush and Vice President Cheney are former heads of oil companies in Texas.

## Useful resources

- ***Rogue State:***  
*a guide to the World's only superpower*  
**by William Blum**  
Zed Books 2002
- ***ZNet website***  
**[www.zmag.org](http://www.zmag.org)**  
*Articles, discussion & analysis on world events*
- ***Stop the War website***  
**[www.stopwar.org.uk](http://www.stopwar.org.uk)**  
*website of the campaign against a war with Iraq.*
- ***Voices in the Wildernes***  
*website of the campaign to break the sanctions against Iraq.*

**[www.viwuk.freeseerve.co.uk](http://www.viwuk.freeseerve.co.uk)**

## A just war?

So why are the British and US governments so keen to pursue a war, and why now? Even this brief look at the role of oil shows how crucial it is to US policy. Democrat or dictator, weapons of mass destruction or not, with or without UN resolutions, the US needs to control the Middle East.

We cannot directly effect the actions of the US Government, but the British Government is playing a junior role in pushing this forward. We must do our utmost to ensure that British forces, British bases and British political influence is not used to protect cheap oil for the US.

If you would like to be more involved in campaigning against a war with Iraq, or if you would like to make a donation to support our work, please contact: -