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Once Again: What Was the Real Motivation for War on Iraq?

The public scandals raging on both sides of the Atlantic around the American and British case for war on Iraq – now including a dead whistle blower, accusations of “sexed up” intelligence reports, and bogus claims in the State of the Union Address – lead us back to the key question: why did the war really happen?

If the war was not really about weapons of mass destruction (other countries, including Pakistan and North Korea, unambiguously have WMD, and have not been invaded); if the US and the UK did not actually believe that Iraq supported anti-US terrorists (the terrorists that have been the greatest threat to the US are much more likely to have been supported by the Saudis), then what were the real motivations behind the attack on Iraq?

Many have argued that the war was really about oil. To say that the war was “about oil” does not completely exclude terrorism as a motivating factor. After all, the Bush administration knew who financed Al Qaeda, and

knew that Osama bin Laden was the embodiment of at least a portion of the Saudi leadership’s world view.

A number of observers have noted that the key people who are in ascendance in the Bush administration, such as the radical right-winger Paul Wolfowitz, have never been particularly economically oriented, but rather more interested in US military and political power. This is not to say that the Bush administration is uninterested in the fraction of the business class interested in oil rents, but only that Iraqi oil may not be the whole or even most of the story.

“The New Imperialism”

David Harvey, a prominent geographer and political theorist, suggests that we are entering what he calls “the New Imperialism,” where profits are made by dispossessing the property of other countries. According to this argument, the US had lost some of its dominance over the world’s political economy by 1973. While attempting to restore the level of profitability it experienced in the Golden Age of the 1940s, 50s

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and 60s, the US was unable to “send in the marines” to protect business interests, because Americans had had enough of war after the defeat in Vietnam. Indirect measures, such as use of American financial power, became necessary, but these have proven to be inadequate on their own.

The result has been an empowered OPEC, and the oil-rich countries have been able to raise prices, thereby redistributing some of the world’s wealth to those who possess the oil. True, the OPEC countries still need to recycle petro-dollars to the West, and they cannot be indifferent to the economies where the demand for their oil comes from, but they have a good deal of autonomy.

It appears the US administration is in the process of trying to reverse this situation by taking direct control over Middle Eastern oil and the states that have made use of oil rents to serve purposes that are now not consistent with US interests.

In addition to taking control of Iraq’s oil, as well as its foreign and military policy, Naomi Klein tells us that the US is in the process of privatizing every conceivable aspect of the Iraqi economy. Hospitals, schools, even the army, are primed for privatization. It is plausible to see American firms employing Iraqi labour to produce goods and services for domestic use, as well as for exports, using Iraqi oil revenue as the source of investment funds. Iraq becomes a place for capital accumulation for American firms in all sectors of the economy.

“All of the Above”

By putting hundreds of thousands of US troops in “Fort Iraq,” the Americans have positioned themselves to do “all of the above.” Regain control over Iraqi oil, hand the rest of the economy over to other US multinationals, reacquire any of the WMD that they may have sold Saddam, or provide new ones if it serves the US’s military interests. This would also allow the US to eliminate opposition in the form of theocratic terrorists or progressive democrats, who might have other ideas for what a democratically run Iraq might wish to do with respect to its oil wealth and what kind of political perspective to facilitate in the region.

Iraq now can become a place where the state and

the economy can be directly controlled, either by some version of the British colonial system or by a puppet regime class such as that of the late Shah in Iran. The Shah was put in place after the US overthrew a democratically elected Iranian government, whose stated goal was to nationalize the oil in Iran. It is possible to suggest that this is not so much a dispossession, but a repossession of resources and state power that the colonial powers once held.

The implications of the victory by the US goes well beyond American business collecting Iraqi oil rents and the profits to be had by exploiting Iraqi labour with investments made from these same rents. Fort Iraq becomes the place where orders emanate for the entire region. From Saudi Arabia to Pakistan to Iran the message is clear. We will decide what weapons you are allowed, to whom you may lend political support, and whether or not we will allow you to possess, even nominally, your own resources. From the Middle East to Asia, control over the labour, resources and foreign policy becomes the domain of the Americans.

—Robert Chernomas

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