

'War for oil' claim doesn't fit the facts

By Gal Luft

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Allegations that the Bush administration was driven to invade Iraq by a lust for the country's oil have been part of the anti-war movement's narrative since even before the war's first shots were fired. The image of a White House hijacked by a cabal of former oil executives who steer foreign policy to advance Big Oil's interests gained credence as disillusionment from the war grew.

This idea is now being reinforced by former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, whose memoir hit bookstore shelves this month.

"I'm saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows - the Iraq war is largely about oil," wrote the man dubbed "The Oracle."

As long as such allegations came from Michael Moore, they could be brushed aside, but echoed by Mr. Greenspan, one of Washington's most influential yet least controversial figures, it's time to expose the charge to serious scrutiny.

As director of an organization dedicated to reducing America's dependence on oil, I'd be last to deny the toxic influence oil dependence has on America's foreign policy, its international conduct and its selection of "friends and allies" in the Middle East. There is no doubt that since the 1945 meeting between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Saudi King Ibn Saud, the United States has been militarily committed to the stability of the Persian Gulf and time and again has used its muscle to guarantee the supply of oil from the region.

But while there is no gainsaying America's oil dependence, attributing oil motivation to every U.S. activity in the Persian Gulf is a gross extrapolation.

While proponents of the view that "it's the oil, stupid" offer little evidence to support their claim, the evidence to the contrary is ample. Take, for example, the report of the 2000 National Energy Policy Development Group, also known as the Cheney Report. This policy paper, composed by no fewer than eight Cabinet members, reflects the pre-9/11 mindset within the Bush White House on how to achieve energy security. Yet it has almost no mention of Iraq and its vast oil reserves. The opposite is true: The report warns against concentration of world oil production in one region and calls for the United States to diversify its energy supply away from the Middle East.

Despite the involvement of Saudi nationals in the 9/11 attacks, the Bush team did not for one moment contemplate invading oil-rich Saudi Arabia. Instead, it chose to invade Afghanistan, the country with the least amount of oil in Central Asia. Furthermore, the administration decided to end the decades-long American military presence in Saudi Arabia, a country that produces five times as much oil as Iraq, and

move U.S. bases to Qatar, which produces one-tenth as much as Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, which has essentially run out of oil - a questionable move for a nation whose supposed main driver was oil.

The administration's actions before the 2003 invasion of Iraq raise another question. At the time, Iraq was exporting hardly any oil and was under a strict sanctions regime that prevented international companies from investing in its ailing oil industry. For profit-driven companies such as Exxon and Halliburton, the sanctions were an impediment to business, and they lobbied the administration to review them. The last thing they wanted was the uncertainty associated with war. Yet since his inauguration in early 2001 and up until the war's start in March 2003, President Bush was persistent in maintaining the sanctions regime, providing competitive advantage to non-American companies bidding for Iraqi oil. Mr. Bush's decision to go to war against the interests of Big Oil rather than lifting the sanctions pokes a huge hole in the Iraq-is-about-oil narrative.

Before the war, the United States imported very little oil from Iraq, and oil stood at \$30 a barrel. Today, only 4 percent of U.S. oil imports come from Iraq, and oil is at \$80. With 160,000 American troops in Iraq, America's oil companies are nowhere to be seen. Russian and Chinese companies are enjoying the spoils of war. If the "Iraq is about oil" cohort is right, and Iraq was truly about oil, then our failure there is even bigger than we thought.

But it isn't. Oil played at best a supporting role in the decision-making process that led to the war, and the notion that Mr. Bush was oil-driven deserves a decent burial. Mr. Greenspan's statement has only one significance: It serves as a painful reminder of the administration's failure to provide a compelling explanation for why we are in Iraq. And in the absence of such explanation, even oracles can get confused.

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