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Oil and the Decision to Invade Iraq

John S. Duffield

Draft: November 5, 2010

Note: This chapter is a substantially revised version of John S. Duffield, "Oil and the Iraq War: How the United States Could Have Expected to Benefit, and Might Still," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9, no. 2 (June 2005): 109-41. It also draws upon material in John S. Duffield, *Over a Barrel: The Costs of U.S. Foreign Oil Dependence* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), and Peter J. Dombrowski and John S. Duffield, "Are We Safer Now?" in John S. Duffield and Peter J. Dombrowski, eds., *Balance Sheet: The Iraq War and U.S. National Security* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009): 158-202. I wish to thank Matthew Schipani, Raluca Viman Miller, and Kristopher Sauriol for research assistance and Gregory Gause and Ed Morse for comments on an earlier version.

I. Introduction

What role did oil play in the decision to invade Iraq in 2003? We still do not know exactly why the Bush administration went to war against Iraq, and we may never know. Certainly, no compelling evidence, either in the form of declassified documents or participants' memoirs, has yet emerged indicating that oil was a prominent factor or constant consideration in the thinking of decisionmakers within the Bush administration. But oil is nevertheless critical to understanding the decision to invade Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein from power. Oil did not make a U.S. war against Iraq inevitable. But it did much to set the stage for war, greatly increasing the incentives to topple Saddam, by any means possible. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the invasion of Iraq ever having occurred but for oil. Only by understanding the ways in which oil has infused the U.S. strategic calculus in the Persian Gulf can we fully make sense of the war.

Why is this the case? The United States has had a number of interests in the Persian Gulf, but it has been the region's oil, more than any other factor, that has caused the United States to regard the Gulf as strategically important. In particular, the United States has long had a substantial interest in seeing that Persian Gulf oil flowed steadily, and in large quantities, on to world markets. For many years, this interest has motivated – and been used to justify – an ever deeper degree of U.S. involvement and intervention in the region.

In the early 2000s, moreover, it was the regime of Saddam Hussein that represented the principal threat to the stability of the Gulf and its ability to supply the world with oil. Saddam had long harbored ambitions to dominate the region, and he had twice invaded neighboring countries in an effort to realize those ambitions. In addition, despite the constraints placed on Iraq's military capabilities by the Gulf War of 1991 and the subsequent U.N. sanctions, many observers both inside and outside the Bush administration believed that Iraq possessed at least some chemical and biological weapons and might someday acquire nuclear weapons. And armed with a combination WMD and conventional military capabilities, Saddam might once again conclude that he could move against his oil-rich neighbors.

This is not to say that the United States could not have sought to address the regional threat posed by Saddam in other ways. Indeed, it had tried to do so, with considerable success, through a policy of containing and deterring Iraq for a dozen years after the end of the Gulf War. But both the U.N. sanctions regime and the substantial U.S. military presence in the Gulf on which this policy depended were becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

Forceful regime change also offered a number of other potential benefits in comparison with the alternatives. In particular, it could remove the constraints that had prevented Iraq

from realizing its own substantial potential as an oil producer at a time when long-term trends pointed toward a tighter world oil market. Thus going to war was an increasingly attractive option.

II. What Others Have Said About the Role of Oil

Much of what has been said and written about the role of oil in the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq falls into two categories. On the one hand, there are some, often members of the Bush administration, who hardly mention oil in their accounts or who deny, usually strenuously, that the war had anything to do with oil. On the other hand, there are those who argue that the war was all about oil.

The Bush administration offered a variety of justifications for its decision to go to war against Iraq. During the run up to the invasion, President George W. Bush and other high-level officials emphasized the threat to U.S. national security posed by Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction and its ties to international terrorists. Later, they stressed the need to promote democracy in the Middle East. And along the way, they highlighted Saddam Hussein's despotic rule and human rights abuses.

Conspicuously absent from these justifications were the possible oil-related benefits of going to war. With one noteworthy exception, which is cited below, the major public statements made by President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld contained hardly any references to oil as a reason for war. And when oil was mentioned, it was usually in the context of denying that it was a motivation. Thus Rumsfeld famously insisted that the conflict had "nothing to do with

oil, literally nothing to do with oil” (Everest 2004, 248), and Bush speech writer David Frum argued that “The United States is not fighting for oil in Iraq” (cited in Rutledge 2005, 179). Likewise, defenders of the administration’s policy outside the government flatly denied that the war had anything to do with oil (e.g., Boot 2003).

This absence of oil-related motives has been a theme of many subsequent accounts of the Bush administration’s decision making. Third-party descriptions based on access to decision makers, such as those by Bob Woodward (2002, 2004), Ron Suskind (2004), and Thomas Ricks (2006), make little or no mention of oil. Nor do those few biographies and memoirs by former Bush administration officials that have appeared so far (e.g., Feith 2008; McClellan 2008). The principal exception is Alan Greenspan’s “Age of Turbulence,” in which the former head of the U.S. Federal Reserve writes that “The Iraq war is largely about oil” (Greenspan 2007, 463). But even Greenspan’s claim is too general to be of much use in parsing the role that oil might have played in the administration’s decision making.

In contrast, critics of the war, both at the time and in subsequent years, have often argued that the war was all about oil (e.g., Almond 2003; Diebel 2003; Klare 2003; Lindorff 2003). This argument has taken several different forms, but in each case, oil-related benefits were presumably a central part of the Bush administration’s decision calculus.

One popular version is that the Bush administration sought to gain direct control over Iraq’s sizeable oil supplies. Indeed, according to a Pew Research Center poll conducted shortly before the war began, a majority of respondents in France (75 percent), Germany (54 percent), and Russia (76 percent) agreed with the statement that “the United States wanted to control Iraqi oil” (Boot 2003). One purpose would have been to make Iraq’s oil available for American

consumers. Another would have been to restore access to Iraq's lucrative oil fields to American oil companies (Paul 2003; Israeli 2004, 141-77; Rutledge 2005, 176-86; Leach 2006; Maass 2009, 136-50). Iraq had nationalized its oil industry in the 1970s, kicking out the mostly U.S.-based international oil companies. In the years prior to the invasion, however, Saddam Hussein had selectively signed contracts for the development of new oil fields with companies from China, Russia, and other more sympathetic countries. Not only were American oil companies frozen out of the deals, but a significant uptick in Iraqi oil production potentially threatened to drive down the price of oil, thereby hurting U.S. companies (Ferraro 2003).

Others have argued that the control of Iraq's oil was meant to be a means to a larger end: U.S. control over the world's oil supplies more generally. It would have given the United States a tool for pressuring on Saudi Arabia and other oil producing states. It would have enabled the United States "to undercut any Saudi moves to slash production and hike oil prices. No longer would the oil weapon hang over America like the sword of Damocles..." (Rutledge 2005, 177; see also Standlee 2005, 39-40; Callincos 2005, 597-602; Israeli 2004). To the contrary, by controlling the amount of oil on the market, the United States would now be able to exert financial pressure on oil producing states as a means of promoting political and economic reforms. Thus Iraqi oil would be "a weapon for undermining Arab regimes and Iran, bringing 'democracy' to the Middle East and making the region safer for the US and Israel." (Alkadiri and Mohamedi 2003, 20) Finally, controlling Iraq's oil would also eliminate the threat that OPEC would begin to denominate oil sales in euros, thereby reducing the influence of the dollar in world markets (Clark 2005).

A final variant of this argument is that the ultimate goal of the war was to shore up the global U.S.-led liberal economic order. In the words of Stokes and Raphael,

Saddam was removed not only because he posed a continuing threat to US control of the region's oil reserves but because the act of removal provided an opportunity to replace him with a ruling strata more compliant to the interests of global capital (Stokes and Raphael 2010, 96).

Thus war would benefit not just U.S. companies but the entire capitalist system and make Iraq a showcase of neoliberal doctrine (see also Everest 2004, 248-76).

This chapter takes an intermediate position. In a sense, it argues that both those who deny that oil played a role in the Bush administration's decision making and those who insist that the war was all about oil may be at least partially right. Control of Iraq's oil may not have been the immediate or a conscious reason for going to war, but the purposes of the war were deeply rooted in the region's oil. Just as the existence of the USSR did so much to shape U.S. foreign and security policy during the cold war, the presence of so much valuable oil in the Persian Gulf has done much to condition U.S. policy toward that region, resulting in a greater degree of involvement and, ultimately, a greater inclination toward war than would otherwise have been the case. The remainder of the chapter elaborates on these connections.

III. U.S. Interests in the Persian Gulf

It goes without saying that the Persian Gulf has mattered a great deal to the United States. But the most important U.S. interest in the region has been and remains its copious

supplies of fossil fuels, especially oil. As Richard Haass, the first Director of Policy Planning in the State Department during the Bush administration, has written,

the principal reason the [Persian Gulf] region matters as much as it does stems from its [oil and gas] resources and their relevance to the world economy... absent oil and oil's importance the region would count for much less (Haass 2009, 76).

This interest does not derive particularly from the United States' own dependence on Persian Gulf oil, however. Although the United States has imported a more or less steadily increasing percentage of the oil it consumes, only a small fraction of that oil has come from the Persian Gulf. In 2002, just prior to the Iraq war, the United States consumed approximately 19.8 million barrels per day (MBD) of oil. Of this, 10.5 MBD (53 percent) represented net imports, but only 2.3 MBD of the imported oil – about 12 percent of U.S. consumption and 22 percent of U.S. net imports -- came from the Middle East (USEIA 2010, 129 and 135).

Rather, the U.S. interest in the region has been due primarily to the dependence of the world economy as a whole on Persian Gulf oil. Since the mid-1960s, oil has been the single most important global energy source, and in 2002, it accounted for 38 percent of total world energy consumption (BP 2010). And for the last four decades, except for a few years in the mid-1980s, the Persian Gulf has been the largest oil producing region. In 2002, it accounted for nearly 30 percent of global oil production and nearly 40 percent of all oil exports (BP 2010).

Consequently, although the United States has never depended on the Persian Gulf for more than a small percentage of the oil it consumes, the health of the U.S. economy has been highly sensitive to developments in the region, in two ways. First, a disruption of Persian Gulf oil supplies would cause oil prices to rise in the United States, even if it imported not a single

barrel of oil. This is because “the United States and the other major oil importers are all part of a single, seamless oil market driven by supply and demand...” (Telhami, Hill, et al. 2002).

Second, an oil shock originating in the region would harm the economies of major U.S. economic partners in Europe and Asia, which have been more heavily dependent on imported oil in general and Persian Gulf oil in particular, with deleterious consequences for production and employment in the United States (see also Klare 2004a, 78; 2008, 186).

And during the first years of the Bush administration, it appeared that the importance of Persian Gulf oil would only increase in the coming decades. In early 2003, the U.S. Energy Information Administration (USEIA) projected that global oil demand would grow from 77.1 MBD in 2001 to 118.8 MBD by 2025, an increase of 54 percent (USEIA 2003b, Table C4). An increasing percentage of that oil, moreover, was expected to come from the Persian Gulf. The USEIA projected that the Middle East’s share of global oil production might increase to more than 34 percent in 2025 (USEIA 2003a, Table C21) and that the Gulf’s share of all oil exports would reach almost 60 percent by 2020 (USEIA 2001, 59).¹

The main reason for the centrality of the Persian Gulf in these projections was the fact that nearly two-thirds of the world’s proven oil reserves were estimated to lie in the region. In 2002, Saudi Arabia alone was attributed with a quarter of all proven oil reserves (262 billion barrels), with most of the balance being provided by Iraq itself (112.5 billion barrels), the United Arab Emirates (98 billion barrels), Kuwait (96.5 billion barrels), and Iran (90 billion barrels) (BP 2003).

In sum, during the decades leading up to the Iraq war, U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf derived primarily from the region’s oil. As veteran Persian Gulf expert Gary Sick has written,

the interests of the United States in the Persian Gulf region have been very simple and consistent: first, to ensure access by the industrialized world to the vast oil resources of the region; and second, to prevent any hostile power from acquiring political or military control over these resources... Other objectives, such as preserving the stability and independence of the Gulf states or containing the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, were derivative concerns and were implicit in the two grand themes of oil and containment (Sick 2003, 291).

Put more simply, in the words of noted Middle East analyst Kenneth Pollack, a former Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Council official,

America's primary interest in the Persian Gulf lies in ensuring the free and stable flow of oil from the region to the world at large (Pollack 2003, 3).

As further evidence of the strategic U.S. interest in Persian Gulf oil supplies, one can point to the repeated U.S. interventions and deepening American involvement in the region, especially since the 1970s. The principal reason for this involvement is that oil production and exports there have been subject to periodic, and occasionally severe, disruptions.

Consequently, the United States has been highly motivated to take measures designed to prevent such disruptions and, beyond that, to encourage regional producers to supply the world market with adequate quantities of oil at reasonable prices.

During the first phase of U.S. involvement, in the mid- and late 1970s, American policy makers tried to avoid a repeat of the first oil embargo and to obtain the help of regional producers in stabilizing the price of oil as well as to exclude Soviet influence from the region.

Under the Nixon Doctrine, however, the United States sought to rely primarily on regional

powers to maintain order and promote U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf. To that end, successive administrations sold massive amounts of often advanced arms to Iran and Saudi Arabia under the so-called “twin pillars” strategy.

That limited initial approach was undermined by the Iranian Revolution and then the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both in 1979. In response, under the Carter Doctrine and the subsequent Reagan Corollary, the United States indicated a new willingness to intervene militarily to prevent any outside power – but especially the Soviet Union – from gaining control of the region’s oil resources. It also began to create a dedicated capability to facilitate military intervention, if deemed necessary, including a larger military presence in the region, bases, and new strategic mobility forces. That capability was first put to use in the late 1980s, when the United States agreed to escort Kuwaiti tankers threatened by Iranian attacks (Operation Earnest Will). During the 1980s, the Reagan administration also provided covert assistance to Iraq in order to prevent Iran from dominating the region.

U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf reached a whole new level during the 1990-91 Gulf War (Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm). Several motives lay behind the U.S. intervention, including the imperative to stand up to naked aggression and to uphold international law. But as one of the best histories of the episode notes, “while it was never the case that the Gulf crisis was solely about oil, oil infused every aspect” (Freedman and Karsh 1993, 180). It was bad enough that, with the occupation of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein controlled some 20 percent of the world’s oil reserves. But if unchecked, the Iraqi leader was poised to dominate Saudi Arabia and the other oil-producing countries of the region through the threat or actual use of force. “He was clearly in a position to be able to dictate the future of

worldwide energy policy,” warned Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, “and that gave him a stranglehold on our economy and on that of most of the other nations of the world as well” (Quoted in Klare 2004b, 6. See also Freedman and Karsh 1993, 180; Little 2002, 255 and 259).

The stakes for the United States could hardly have been higher. As President Bush himself cautioned:

Our jobs, our way of life, our own freedom and the freedom of friendly countries around the world would all suffer if control of the world’s great oil reserves fell into the hands of Saddam Hussein (Yergin 1991, 773).

Thus, he concluded, “We cannot permit a resource so vital to be dominated by one so ruthless. And we won’t” (Little 2002, 73).

Following the Gulf War, a small but significant U.S. combat force remained in the theater. It served both to deter possible further aggressive moves by Iraq against its oil-rich neighbors and to enforce the U.N. sanctions that had been imposed on the country after the war. U.S. naval forces made up much of the multinational Maritime Interception Force operating in the Gulf that enforced the embargo on Iraqi imports and oil exports. Army units repeatedly exercised the prepositioned equipment in Kuwait as a show of force under operations Vigilant Warrior and Desert Spring, and both Army and Marine Corps forces conducted frequent exercises. Most extensive of all, however, were the air operations intended to enforce the no-fly zones imposed over northern and southern Iraq. When the Iraq war began in 2003, U.S. pilots had flown over 286,000 missions (Duffield 2008, 178)

Further evidence of the importance the United States has attached to ensuring the integrity of Persian Gulf oil supplies is suggested by the efforts made by U.S. forces to secure

Iraq's oil fields, pipelines, and other oil-related infrastructure, including the Ministry of Oil, during the first days of the Iraq war. Some have argued that this was part of a plan to exert direct control over Iraqi oil or to turn it over to U.S. companies. A more benign interpretation is that the Bush administration wanted to ensure that a future government of Iraq would have the resources needed to pay for the country's reconstruction. Clearly, however, these early actions served the strategic U.S. interest in minimizing the disruption to global oil supplies, even if that goal was later foiled by insurgent attacks on the oil infrastructure.

IV. The Threat Posed by Iraq Under Saddam Hussein

The principal threats to Persian Gulf oil supplies have varied over the years. But in the early 2000s, the greatest threat of all was arguably that posed by Iraq under Saddam Hussein. In the words of General Anthony Zinni, who served as commander in chief of the U.S. Central Command until 2000,

Iraq remains the most significant near-term threat to U.S. interests in the Gulf region (quoted in Klare 2004a, 81).

The Iraqi leader continued to harbor a desire to dominate the region, and he might again have the ability to do so, especially if he were able to acquire significant numbers of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

When the Bush administration took office, Saddam Hussein was widely believed to have expansive regional ambitions. According to a 1998 intelligence community brief, "Saddam is committed to seeing Iraq reemerge as the dominant power in the region" (U.S. Senate 2008, 75) Likewise, a 2001 CIA memorandum asserted that "his strategic aim is to establish Iraq as

the preeminent power in the Persian Gulf” (U.S. Senate 2008, 75). Or in the words of Pollack, who made what was arguably the most compelling public case for going to war against Iraq, “Saddam Hussein [was] determined to overturn the status quo to make himself the hegemon of the Persian Gulf region and the leader of the Arab world...” (Pollack 2002, 153).

As evidence of these ambitions, one needed only to look at Saddam Hussein’s recent behavior toward Iraq’s neighbors.² In 1980, he had attacked Iran, seeking to exploit the internal turmoil roiling its neighbor to make a variety of political and territorial gains. Then in 1990, just two years after the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq had invaded and quickly occupied Kuwait, and it seemed poised to threaten Saudi Arabia as well. Thus it seemed logical to conclude that, given the opportunity, Saddam would once again make some kind of aggressive move – intimidation, coercion, or even invasion – against one or more of his oil-rich neighbors. But would he get the chance?

Much of Iraq’s military capability had been destroyed during the Gulf War, and following the war, the threat posed by Iraq to its neighbors continued to be neutralized by a combination of U.N. sanctions and a greatly increased U.S. military presence in the region. The former made it difficult for the country to reconstitute its military power, while the latter was intended to deter any future Iraqi attempts at aggression. Nevertheless, many observers believed that Saddam Hussein had abandoned neither his ambitions to dominate the Gulf nor his efforts to develop an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction that would help him to realize that goal. Indeed, the U.S. intelligence community viewed “Baghdad’s goal of becoming the predominant regional power” as a key driver behind its WMD program (cited in U.S. Senate 2006, 113). Consequently, as the Bush administration settled into office in 2001, it was possible to imagine

that Saddam Hussein might once again make a bid for regional hegemony and control over the Gulf's oil resources if he were allowed to remain in power.

Members of the Bush administration described Iraq in no uncertain terms as possessing a substantial arsenal of weapons of mass destruction that might soon include nuclear weapons. As Cheney told an audience in Nashville in August 2002,

Simply stated, there is no doubt Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction.

There is no doubt that he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us. And there is no doubt that his aggressive regional ambitions will lead him into future confrontations with his neighbors (U.S. Senate 2008, 79).

As a result, much has been made of the fact that no WMD were found in Iraq.

Nevertheless, prior to the war, U.S. and some other Western intelligence agencies believed that Iraq probably possessed significant quantities of chemical and biological weapons (or the ability to produce them) and that it probably maintained a nuclear weapons program (e.g., CIA 2002). Most importantly, many reasonable people feared that Saddam Hussein would be able to acquire a formidable arsenal of nuclear weapons in as little as a few years, if left unchecked.

Pollack presented one of the most compelling cases for military action. In his view, Iraq had essentially figured out how to build nuclear weapons, had been able to hang on to most of the knowledge and equipment that it needed to do so, and was probably working to enrich uranium. Consequently, according to German and U.S. intelligence estimates he cited, Iraq might have been able to make a nuclear weapon in as few as three to five years. And, Pollack concluded, if Iraq was able to buy enriched uranium, as it appeared to be attempting to do, "it could probably build a workable device in a year or two" (Pollack 2002, 168 and 173-75).³

Largely overlooked in the debates over Iraq's WMD, moreover, were the country's conventional military capabilities. Yet these, too, posed a significant potential threat to its neighbors, just as they had in the past (Klare 2004a, 81). As Pollack observed, "despite the devastation of the Gulf War and sanctions, Iraqi forces remain large enough to give them an edge over any single Persian Gulf state or any combination of them... Moreover, Iraqi forces possess a qualitative edge over the Persian Gulf states that magnifies their quantitative advantage" (Pollack 202, 160). To be sure, the Gulf War and subsequent U.N. sanctions had exacted a considerable toll, especially in the area of logistics. As a result, "Iraq almost certainly ha[d] lost the ability to mount sustained ground offensives that could threaten GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] oil production beyond Kuwait and, perhaps, northernmost Saudi Arabia" (Pollack 2002, 165). Nevertheless, he continued,

in the absence of U.S. forces, the Republican Guards could probably overrun Kuwait again as they did in 1990, albeit with greater difficulty because of the state of Iraqi logistics. Iraqi forces might be able to undertake similarly limited operations versus Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Iran, although they probably could not replicate the multicorps offensives they staged against Iran in 1988.

Thus, Pollack concluded, "even in their current weakened state, Iraq's [conventional] capabilities would pose a significant threat to regional stability if the United States were ever to pull its forces out of the region" (Pollack 2002, 149 and 160).

What might Saddam Hussein have been expected to do with such an arsenal? Even with nuclear weapons, it is almost inconceivable that he would have tried to attack directly the United States or any of its traditional allies, including Israel. Such an attack would certainly

have been met by a devastating response. Although he had used WMD (in this case chemical weapons) against Iran and Kurds in Iraq, his victims had lacked the ability to respond in kind. Thus, Iraq would be unable to use or even threaten to use nuclear weapons so long as the United States was able to retaliate (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003).

Hardly more likely was the possibility that Saddam Hussein might clandestinely transfer nuclear weapons to a terrorist group hostile to the United States. The probability of such a nuclear handoff was extremely small, for at least four reasons. First, there was no evidence of any genuine connection between Saddam Hussein and such groups, especially al Qaeda; to the contrary, a history of enmity existed between them. Second, if Saddam Hussein did give nuclear weapons to a terrorist group, he would lose control over how they would be used. Third, if he nevertheless went ahead, he could not be sure that the transfer would go undetected, especially given the U.S. imperatives to monitor the situation carefully. And even if a transfer went undetected, Saddam Hussein could not assume that the United States would not retaliate against him anyway if a terrorist nuclear attack were to occur (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003). Thus, even Pollack flatly admitted, “terrorism is the least of the threats posed by Iraq to the interests of the United States” and “Saddam Hussein is not likely to give weapons of mass destruction to terrorists” (Pollack 2002, 153 and 180).

Rather, it was the possible combination of WMD and conventional capabilities that posed the greatest threat. With nuclear weapons in particular, Saddam Hussein might conclude that he could safely use his conventional forces against his neighbors, since an Iraqi nuclear arsenal might deter other states from engaging in a rerun of Operation Desert Storm. Indeed,

Saddam might believe that even the United States “would be deterred from taking any steps to reverse effects of Iraqi conventional aggression” (n.a. 2002, 7; see also Pollack 2002, 272).

Thus the principal danger to U.S. interests was that Iraq would have sought to use its military capabilities to realize its regional ambitions. As Vice President Cheney warned in his August 2002 Nashville speech, “[a]rmed with an arsenal of these weapons of terror, and seated atop ten percent of the world’s oil reserves, Saddam Hussein could then be expected to seek domination of the entire Middle East, take control of a great portion of the world’s energy supplies, directly threaten America’s friends throughout the region, and subject the United States or any other nation to nuclear blackmail.”⁴ President Bush echoed this view in his January 2003 State of the Union Address, when he stated that “With nuclear arms or a full arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, Saddam Hussein could resume his ambitions of conquest in the Middle East...”⁵

If Saddam Hussein were ever to achieve this objective, the consequences would be dire. In Pollack’s words, “he [would] use this power to advance Iraq’s political interests, even to the detriment of its economic interests and the world’s... If Saddam Hussein were ever to control the Persian Gulf oil resources, his past record suggests that he would be willing to cut or even halt oil exports altogether whenever it suited him to force concessions from his fellow Arabs, Europe, the United States, or the world as a whole. And even if he failed, he could still wreak considerable havoc on the region and world oil supplies” (Pollack 2002, 152 and 272). Thus, Cheney concluded in a retrospective defense of the decision to go to war, “had we followed the counsel of inaction, the Iraqi regime would still be a menace to its neighbors and a destabilizing force in the Middle East”(Schmitt 2003).

V. The Lack of Good Alternatives: Growing Difficulties with Containing and Deterring Iraq

To be sure, regime change via war was not the only option available to the Bush administration, but it was an increasingly attractive one, relative to the others. One alternative was to pursue regime change by other means. Indeed, this had been a part of official U.S. policy since at least the passage and signing of the “Iraqi Liberation Act of 1998.” The problem was that the United States had few other means to achieve this goal. It provided assistance to elements of the democratic opposition in exile, but there was little it could do inside Iraq to set the stage for a transition of power.

More promising was a continuation of the policy of containing and deterring Iraq, which had been in place since the Gulf War. At the end of the war, the U.N. had mandated the destruction of Iraq’s WMD, imposed inspections to verify Iraqi compliance, and erected a tough sanctions regime to prevent Iraq from reconstituting its conventional and unconventional military capabilities. In addition, the United States had established a significant military presence in the Gulf designed to deter any future Iraqi acts of aggression.

For the better part of a decade, these measures had been largely successful at neutralizing the Iraqi threat. In the late 1990s, however, U.N. inspections were ended, and as time wore on, the sanctions regime and important components of the U.S. military presence had become increasingly difficult to maintain. As a result, one could again imagine a time when Saddam Hussein would once more be free to pursue his goal of dominating the Gulf.

A number of countries, including some permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, had never been enthusiastic about the sanctions in view of the costs they imposed and

the lost economic opportunities they represented. And over the years, the sanctions had come under increasing international criticism because of the humanitarian crisis that they were allegedly causing in Iraq. In the mid-1990s, the Security Council had made a serious attempt to address the latter problem by allowing Iraq to export a considerable amount of oil in order to earn the foreign exchange required to purchase foodstuffs, medicines, and other humanitarian supplies abroad, the so-called “oil for food” program. But the crisis did not seem to abate, in no small part because of Saddam’s deft manipulation of the sanctions, and pressure continued to grow to eliminate or at least dilute the sanctions substantially. Thus in December 1999, the Security Council lifted the cap on the amount of oil Iraq could sell and greatly expanded the types of goods it could import.

At the same time, Saddam Hussein was proving increasingly adept at evading the sanctions. Iraq was able to divert a growing amount of oil from legitimate sales via the oil for food program to smuggling by truck, pipeline, and boat. In 1999, according to Pollack, the United States estimated that only about five percent of Iraq’s oil revenues were skirting the U.N. system, whereas just two years later, that share had grown to roughly 20 percent (Pollack 2002, 101). Simultaneously, Iraq had also managed since 2000 to skim money from the legitimate oil sales by demanding surcharges on each barrel of oil sold. All told, Pollack estimated that Saddam’s regime would “rake in \$2.5-3 billion, representing 15-22 percent of all Iraqi revenue” in 2002 (Pollack 2002, 214-25). This was a vast sum that Saddam could spend however he liked, and Iraq was “using the money to import prohibited items for its conventional military and WMD programs” (Pollack 2002, 216).

In the face of these mounting challenges to the sanctions regime, the Bush administration initially pursued a two-prong strategy. On the one hand, it agreed to loosen further restrictions on the import of civilian goods, while attempting to ensure that items with overt military applications remained blocked, in order to blunt the political pressure to end sanctions altogether. On the other hand, it sought to deal with the problem of smuggling by bringing illegal oil shipments within the U.N. program. By mid-2002, however, both efforts had floundered in the face of determined opposition to any toughening of the sanctions from Russia, France, and China, which favored even looser restrictions, and the Security Council could agree on no more than narrowing the list of prohibited dual-use items (Pollack 2002, 218-25; Sengupta 2002).

As a result, U.S. officials could not count on the sanctions regime to remain effective at containing Saddam's military power indefinitely. To the contrary, according to Pollack, "the changes the U.N. agreed to in the spring of 2002... [would] probably allow Iraq to make a partial recovery of its Gulf War military strength... Within a period of as little as three to five years, Iraqi may be able to recover its former logistical prowess..." (Pollack 2002, 167).

Of course, a robust U.S. military presence in the Gulf region might have been sufficient to keep even a strengthening Iraq in check, although there was some question as to whether it could deter a nuclear-armed Saddam Hussein. In any case, however, the difficulties of maintaining the critical American military presence were growing. The problem was most acute in Saudi Arabia, where U.S. military facilities had already been subjected to attacks. In fact, the U.S. presence in the land of Islam's two holiest shrines was stoking anti-American sentiment

throughout the Muslim world as well as criticism of the Saudi ruling family. Indeed, Osama bin Laden had cited it as a major reason for his war against the United States.

One immediate consequence of this growing antipathy was the imposition of restrictions on how U.S. forces in the region could be employed. Most prominently, Saudi Arabia insisted in 2001 that American bases on its soil not be used to carry out air strikes against the Taliban in Afghanistan, although it did allow the United States to use the command and control center at Prince Sultan airbase to coordinate the air campaign (Gause 2003, 2). More fundamentally, it raised questions about the long-term viability of the American military presence. Indeed, regional expert Gregory Gause concluded, “after the attacks of September 11, 2002, an American military presence in the kingdom [was] no longer sustainable in the political system of either the United States or Saudi Arabia” (Gause 2003, 2). Consequently, as Pollack wrote in mid-2003, “the best way for the United States to address the rise of terrorism and the threat of internal instability in Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states would be to reduce its military presence in the region to the absolute minimum, or even to withdraw entirely” (Pollack 2003).

Instead, the United States would have to rely increasingly “on the smaller gulf monarchies to provide the infrastructure for its military presence in the region” (Gause 2003, 2). It had already made use of these countries, especially Kuwait and Bahrain, which had hosted U.S. forces, and there were several reasons to expect greater acceptance of the American military in those states than in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, an American presence there was not unproblematic, and Gause concluded, “a close military association with the United States might become more difficult to sustain domestically in the future.” Public

opinion, where it could be measured, held unfavorable views of U.S. policies in the region, and elections were expected to result in parliaments that were less supportive of U.S. policy objectives than were the ruling regimes (Gause 2003, 23-25).

In view of these developments, it became reasonable to fear that the political-military edifice erected to contain and deter Iraq following the Gulf War might not last. Instead, it would become increasingly difficult to prevent Iraq from acquiring weapons of mass destruction and from embarking once again upon the path of regional domination, with tumultuous consequences for world oil markets. Indeed, this danger was recognized by Rumsfeld and a number of other future high-level Bush administration officials as early as January 1998, in a letter to President Clinton:

...if Saddam does acquire the capability to deliver weapons of mass destruction, as he is almost certain to do if we continue along the present course, the safety of American troops in the region, of our friends and allies like Israel and the moderate Arab states, and a significant portion of the world's supply of oil will all be put at hazard.⁶

The only sure way to avoid this highly undesirable outcome would be to make certain that Saddam did not outlast the U.N. sanctions regime and the U.S. military presence.

VI. Other Benefits of Forceful Regime Change: Liberating Iraqi Oil

In addition to putting a quick end to the threat that Saddam Hussein posed to the stability of Persian Gulf oil supplies, forceful regime change offered a number of other potential benefits, especially in comparison with a continuation of the status quo (see, also, for example, Kubursi 2006). A successful war would send a signal to other potential proliferators that they

could not act with impunity. In fact, the initial success of the U.S. invasion may have prompted Iran to offer a dramatic set of concessions regarding its hitherto secret nuclear program in late 2003, and it coincided with Libya's agreement to disclose and dismantle all of its WMD programs, although the war, in combination with a refusal by the Bush administration to negotiate, may also have galvanized North Korea to complete and test a nuclear weapon (Cirincione 2009). Similarly, the overthrow of Saddam would put on notice other state sponsors of terrorism, even if Iraq itself had had no meaningful ties to al Qaeda.

In addition, a successful war might have been expected to have several regional benefits beyond ending the threat to Persian Gulf oil. By removing a sworn enemy of Israel, it would have enhanced the security of the principal U.S. ally in the Middle East, even if Saddam had been deterred from launching a direct attack on Israel (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 231). Indeed, it might result in the establishment of a new ally that could serve as an alternative host for U.S. military forces in the region. And it might help to open a democratic beachhead in the Persian Gulf that could eventually usher in a broader political and social transformation in the region (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 255-57).

Not least important among these other potential benefits, however, was the effect a war might have on Iraq's own contribution to global energy security. By all accounts, Iraq has had the potential to be one of the world's largest oil producers and exporters. In 2002, it possessed the second largest proven oil reserves, approximately 112 billion barrels, and its probable and possible reserves had been estimated as high as 220 billion barrels. 90 percent of the country, including most of its Western desert, had not been explored. Of the 74 oil fields

that had been discovered and evaluated as of 2002, moreover, only 15, containing less than 40 billion barrels, had actually been developed (USEIA 2003c).⁷

Based on such considerations, a number of experts estimated that Iraq could, with sufficient investment, produce 4.5 to 6 MBD, which would make it the fourth largest producer and third largest exporter of oil in the world (USEIA 2003c; Yergin 2003). And a few, such as Fadhil Chalabi, a former Iraqi Undersecretary of Oil, and Tariq Shafiz, former Vice President and Executive Director of the Iraq National Oil Company (INOC), estimated that Iraq's reserves could ultimately support a production rate of 10-12 MBD, allowing it to rival Saudi Arabia as the world's largest producer and exporter (Kawach 2002).

Actual Iraqi oil production, however, peaked at 3.7 MBD in 1979 and thereafter remained far below its tremendous potential. One reason was the damage inflicted to Iraq's oil infrastructure during the wars initiated by Saddam Hussein. During the early weeks of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq's deepwater oil terminal at Al-Bakr in the Persian Gulf was seriously damaged (Chalabi 2000). As a result, Iraqi oil exports plummeted from over 3 MBD to less than 1 MBD in 1981, and Iraq was unable to make oil shipments from its Gulf terminals for eight years (Yergin 1991, 767).

Following the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war, production grew rapidly, reaching 3.5 MBD in 1990. But hardly had the Iraqi oil industry recovered from that war when it received an even more devastating blow during the 1991 Gulf War. According to the USEIA, an estimated 60 percent of the Northern Oil Company's facilities were damaged in the conflict, and the southern oil industry was decimated (USEIA 2003c). Overall, by one estimate, U.S.-led bombing during the Gulf War cut Iraq's production capacity to 1.1 MBD.⁸

In theory, much of the damage incurred during the Gulf War could have been quickly repaired, just as it had been during and immediately after the Iran-Iraq war. This time, however, repairs and reconstruction were obstructed by the comprehensive U.N. sanctions that were imposed on Iraq in 1990 and left in place after the war. The sanctions prevented Iraq from obtaining the latest technology, spare parts, and foreign investment for its oil fields (Gongloff 2002). Even after Iraq was authorized to spend up to \$600 million per year on spare parts and equipment under the oil-for-food program, the actual delivery was largely delayed on account of restrictions imposed by the U.N. Sanctions Committee (Chalabi 2000).

As a result of these constraints, Iraq's oil production capacity actually declined in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Nor was the situation helped by Saddam Hussein's attempts to manipulate Iraqi oil for political advantage. As recently as early 2002, he had temporarily suspended oil exports in an unsuccessful attempt to exert pressure on the United States and Israel (MacFarquhar 2002). In the process, "Iraq [had] severely tested the resilience of its oil fields by sporadically shutting down oil exports for political reasons over the past two years."⁹ Thus just months before the 2003 war, a Council on Foreign Relations/Baker Institute report estimated Iraq's sustainable oil production capacity at no higher than 2.6 to 2.8 MBD, with production levels declining by 100,000 barrels per day each year.¹⁰ And a secret government task force established in fall 2002 offered an even bleaker assessment, pegging Iraq's production capacity at only 2.1 to 2.4 MBD (Gerth 2002).

Thus by 2002, if not much earlier, it had become clear that the quickest way to remove the constraints that had hobbled Iraqi oil production was to remove Saddam Hussein from power. Regime change could occasion the lifting of the U.N. sanctions and, perhaps even more

importantly, facilitate a resumption of investment in exploration and development. It would also mean the end of Saddam's manipulation of Iraqi oil production and exports for political purposes.

Freeing up Iraq's tremendous oil production potential could in turn have been expected to result in several significant benefits. First, it could help to meet anticipated growth in the world demand for oil. In addition, it could contribute to a more stable world oil market through the creation of greater redundancy in oil supplies and, ideally, additional excess production capacity. Since the late 1970s, the world had counted primarily on Saudi Arabia to prevent dramatic price increases by raising production whenever supplies were disrupted elsewhere. Beginning in the early 1990s, however, the kingdom had been producing at levels that limited its ability to respond to unexpected supply disruptions, and growing tensions within Saudi Arabia itself had begun to call into question its very ability to maintain output at existing, not to mention higher, levels. Meanwhile, the potential for supply disruptions -- and concomitant sharp price increases -- seemed as great as ever. In this context, a significant increase in Iraqi oil production capacity would have been very useful for averting a possible future oil crisis.

Conversely, if worries about Saudi Arabia's production potential were exaggerated, freeing up Iraq's oil production might have been expected to benefit the United States by reducing Saudi influence over world oil markets. U.S. reliance on Saudi Arabia to stabilize world oil markets limited the ability of the United States to criticize Saudi policies and to promote desired domestic political, economic, and social reforms. In addition, Saudi Arabia's spare capacity had given it a degree of influence over the oil market and other oil producers that did not always conform to U.S. interests. The wisdom of relying on Saudi Arabia was further called

into question by revelations about the roles played by Saudis in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Thus, as a controversial July 2002 briefing by a Rand analyst for the U.S. Defense Advisory Board concluded, a pro-Western Iraq could reduce U.S. dependence on Saudi energy exports and enable the United States to force the monarchy to crack down on financing and support for terrorism within its boundaries (Morgan and Ottaway 2002). In this context, the possibility of building up Iraq as an oil-producing counterweight to Saudi Arabia could have appeared very attractive.

VI. Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has argued that Persian Gulf oil greatly increased the likelihood of a U.S. invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s. The United States has had a long-standing interest in seeing that the Persian Gulf be able to supply the world reliably with substantial amounts of oil, and in the early 2000s, Saddam Hussein's regime presented the principal threat to that interest. In addition, the alternatives to war – regime change by other means and especially a continuation of the previous policy of containment and deterrence – appeared either unpromising or less and less attractive. Oil is largely the reason why the Persian Gulf and Saddam Hussein mattered.

But neither should the role of oil in the decision to invade Iraq be overstated. The U.S. interest in Persian Gulf oil and the threat posed by Iraq did not make war inevitable. War was not the only plausible option. In particular, the possibilities for containing and deterring Iraq had not been exhausted. Indeed, as the events of late 2002 demonstrated, it was not impossible to reestablish a tough U.N. inspections regime that, if given more time, might have

greatly clarified just how substantial a threat Iraq posed to its neighbors. To explain why the United States chose war in 2003, one must consider other factors, and three in particular stand out.

One obvious factor that often goes unmentioned was that the United States had the ability to go to war. Simply put, the Bush administration invaded Iraq because it could. Even here, however, perceptions played a role. Experts disagreed on how many forces would be necessary and how much opposition they would face. But the potentially controversial belief that the United States could win a rapid and decisive victory at little cost had been reinforced by the swift defeat of the Taliban in late 2001.

A second important factor was the presidential election of 2000. George Bush's narrow victory resulted in a vast attitudinal shift within the corridors of power. The highest levels of the Bush administration were staffed by a number of people who wanted to adopt a more aggressive policy toward Iraq than had members of the Clinton administration. Indeed, some, such as Paul Wolfowitz, the Undersecretary of Defense, made regime change a top priority. It is much harder, if not impossible, to imagine a war being undertaken by a hypothetical Gore administration.

But even the handover of power, alone, might not have been enough. Many in the Bush administration did not assign top priority to Iraq or regard forceful regime change as the best option. Rather, we must also consider the impact of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. They provided both a further reason, however specious, for getting rid of Saddam and, when harnessed to an effective public relations campaign, a compelling justification for war that resonated deeply with the American public. It is possible to imagine a war without the

shock of 9/11, but still difficult. 9/11 created a large window of opportunity for those in the administration who preferred war.

Nevertheless, oil did much to set the stage. Indeed, it was a necessary condition for war. One way to appreciate this is by comparing U.S. policy toward other “rogue” states that the Bush administration did not invade, such as Iran, North Korea, Syria, and Libya. Several other states were seeking to acquire nuclear weapons in the first years of the Bush administration, and at least one -- North Korea -- was closer to having them. Several states had more extensive ties to anti-American terrorists. And a number of other states around the world had fallen equally short of adhering to democratic principles or had engaged in widespread human rights abuses. What made Iraq different? Arguably, it was the threat that it posed to Persian Gulf oil supplies that set Iraq under Saddam Hussein apart from most of the other rogue states against which the United States might have directed its ire. The principal exception to this claim is Iran, but invading that country would have posed a much greater military challenge at the time.

Another way to appreciate the role of oil is to consider the counterfactual, complicated and problematic though it may be. What if the Persian Gulf had never possessed significant amounts of oil? In that case, it is difficult to imagine something like the Iraq war ever having occurred. Even if oil-related considerations played no role in the decision to invade, one can regard the war as a logical – if not the only possible -- culmination of a series of prior steps that were taken largely, if not exclusively, because of the region’s strategic importance to the United States. Some of these steps, such as the Carter Doctrine, Operation Earnest Will, and Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield, were explicitly justified in terms of threats to the

region's oil supplies. Other measures, such as U.S. arms sales in the 1970s and the enforcement of U.N. sanctions in the 1990s, were justified on other grounds. But those grounds could be easily understood in terms of threats to the region's oil. In short, no oil, no war.

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Notes

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⁷ See also “Guiding Principles for U.S. Post-Conflict Policy in Iraq,” Report of an Independent Working Group Cosponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University, December 2002, 18. Available at http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/Iraq_TF.pdf (accessed Nov. 1, 2010).

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¹⁰ “Guiding Principles,” 16.