

The increasingly unfavorable balance of power in the Middle East was used by the oil companies as a justification for the rape of wilderness areas in Alaska and on the West Coast for oil development and for the massive expansion of the nuclear power industry in the 1970s. Fortunately, however, other forces in the U.S. were finding more realistic responses to the crisis — such as energy conservation and development of renewable energy sources and alternative fuels. By the late 1970s, energy demand had ceased growing in the U.S., contradicting predictions such as that of the Ford Foundation in 1974 that energy demand would only continue to be present at an ever-accelerating rate. In 1975, Congress passed the Energy Policy & Conservation Act that mandated both automobile fuel efficiency standards and the creation of the Federal Strategic Petroleum Reserve, an underground emergency oil storehouse designed to cushion the U.S. from the impact of any future embargoes. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter established the Federal Solar Energy Research Institute.

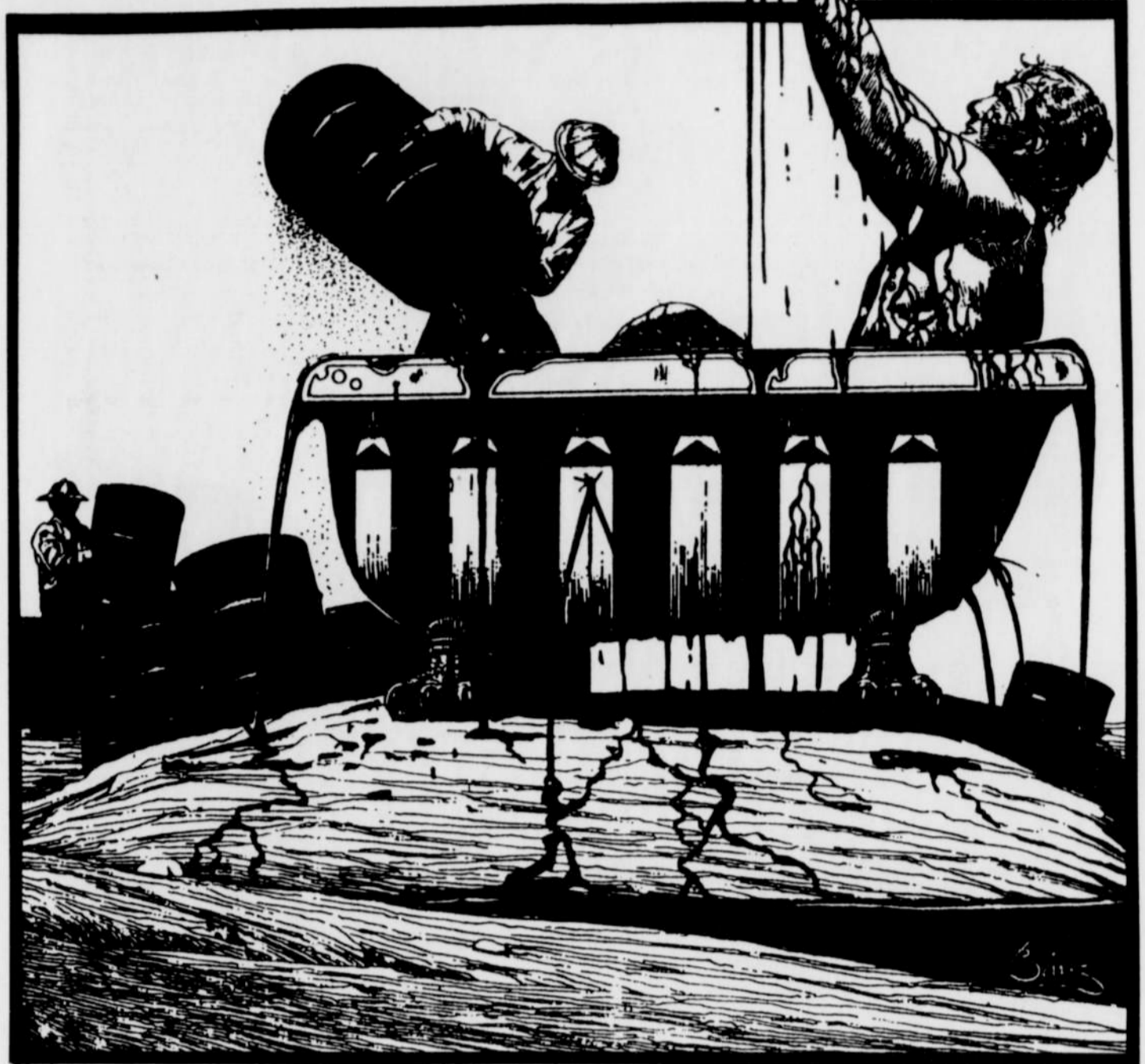
Nonetheless, American reliance on Middle East oil remained overwhelming. The principle U.S. sources now that IPC had been taken over by Iraq were Aramco in Saudi Arabia and the Shah of Iran's dictatorship — which was having to resort to ever more brutal methods to maintain its grip on power in the face of growing unrest.

The nationalist regimes in the Arab world were basically modeled after that of Nasser's Egypt — secular and socialist, supported by Soviet military and economic aid despite the fact these regimes frequently persecuted their own Communists. This Arab nationalist camp was not monolithic — it was divided by bitter rivalries such as that between Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Syria's Hafez Assad, who led opposing factions in the Arab nationalist/socialist Ba'ath Party. However, in 1979 the Shah of Iran fell to a revolution that brought a new kind of nationalist regime to power — the fundamentalist Islamic theocracy of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, equally hostile to both the U.S. and the USSR. The U.S. lost yet another Middle East oil mainstay, prompting a second petroleum squeeze almost as severe as the one of 1973-74. Pro-Khomeini students seized hostages at the U.S. embassy in Iran to press their demands for the life of the ousted Shah. Pro-Khomeini guerrillas briefly seized the Great Mosque in the Islamic holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia in an effort to launch a second fundamentalist revolution but were shortly dislodged by Saudi forces. Skillful media manipulation of the hostage crisis created a wave of jingoism and xenophobia in the U.S. that swept Ronald Reagan to the Presidency in the 1980 elections. President Reagan quickly reversed the progress toward conservation and energy efficiency. Yuppie extravagance and resurgent militarism became the theme of the decade.

It was also in 1980 that Iraq's army invaded Iran, sparking a war that lasted eight years and cost over a million lives. Portraying himself as the defender of Arab nationalism from the threat of Iran's brand of Islamic theocracy, Iraq's Saddam Hussein succeeded in securing funding for his war effort from the oil-rich Persian Gulf ministates — especially Kuwait, which was awash in Japanese yen. Iraq purchased arms from the USSR and France while Iran relied on the massive military that had been built up by the U.S. under the Shah.

United States involvement in the Iran/Iraq War bore hallmarks of schizophrenia. Certain sectors were apparently relieved that two of the U.S.'s biggest potential enemies in the Middle East were busy hurling rockets at each other's capitals and slaughtering each other's draftees. In 1986, Reagan's secret 'Contragate' network smuggled a huge shipment of sophisticated antitank missiles to Iran, using Israel as a conduit (and using the profits to fund rightwing rebels in Nicaragua). However, the U.S. generally considered Iran to be the greater threat, and when Iranian officials leaked the secret deal to a Lebanese newspaper the following year, exposing Iran/Contra and subsequent Congressional probe, the U.S. started to "tilt" toward Iraq. American warships were sent to the Persian Gulf, ostensibly to protect Kuwaiti oil tankers (which were hauling both Kuwaiti and Iraqi oil, mostly to Japan) from Iranian attack, even though most of the interruptions in Persian Gulf shipping were caused by Iraqi attacks on Iranian ships. U.S. involvement climaxed in 1988 when U.S. warships laid waste to an Iranian oil rig, and a U.S. missile cruiser "accidentally" shot an Iranian civilian airliner out of the sky, killing all 290 passengers, including 66 children.

This "tilt" toward Iraq was apparently unaffected by the fact it was Iraq that launched a missile attack on the *USS Stark*, crippling the ship and killing 37 American sailors — or by Iraq's unprovoked poison gas attack on a remote Kurdish market city within its own territory, instantly killing 5,000 civilians and maiming 7,000 others, a simple act of genocide against an ethnic



CHRISTOPHER BING

minority not even involved in the war. In the meantime the Reagan/Bush(Sr.) administration authorized shipment of deadly chemical agents and biocides to Iraq when it got rattled over the prospect of Iran threatening Iraq on the Basra front which was believed would destabilize Kuwait, the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia and jeopardize U.S. oil supplies.

The Iran/Iraq War prompted dramatic changes in the world oil economy. In 1986, in an effort to weaken Iran, Saudi Arabia's powerful oil minister, Shiek Zaki Yamani, induced the other Arab states to follow his nation's lead in raising oil production, with the effect of lowering prices. The global market was instantly glutted and oil prices plummeted. Although oil-producing areas such as Texas, Alaska and Southern California were hurt economically, U.S. policy makers were overjoyed. It was the exact opposite of 1973-74. Iran, with a war effort to finance, was furious and started making veiled threats about instigating fundamentalist Shiite Muslim rebellions within Saudi borders: Saudi Arabia, like most Arab nations, is dominated by the less orthodox Sunni Muslims, while Iran is predominantly Shiite.

In July 1987, Shiite Muslims making their pilgrimage to Islam's holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, rioted, battling Saudi police in the holy city itself, resulting in 400 dead. Shiek Yamani was ousted as Saudi oil minister, a post he had regarded as permanent, and Saudi oil production quickly slowed down. Yet regional production levels never returned to pre-glut levels and Iran continued to assail Saudi Arabia for not doing enough to pressure the other Arab states to roll back production, which helps to explain the U.S. tilt toward Iraq.

Due to less favorable geology and technology, Iran must spend far more money than the Arab states to extract oil. (The U.S., due to still less favorable geology, must spend even more, which is why the U.S. relies heavily on Middle East oil despite sizable domestic sources, especially in Alaska.) Therefore Iran was seriously hurt by the glut while Saudi Arabia, the Gulf ministries and even war-stricken Iraq could ride it out.

But while good for American motorists, the glut caused economic crises in oil-producing nations that had nothing whatever to do with the intrigues in the Middle East, such as Mexico and Nigeria. The value of the Mexican peso took a nosedive, while the military repressed a wave of angry labor protest in Nigeria.

In 1988, the Iran/Iraq War ended in a stalemate, leaving both countries economically devastated. Now it was Iraq's turn to press Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf ministries to lower production. With massive war debts to repay, principally to Kuwait, and war-crippled production infrastructure, high prices were in Iraq's interest. Continued high production and low prices would only mean more suffering for Iraq's people — and thwart Saddam Hussein's personal ambitions to emerge as the leader of the Arab world, a successor to Egypt's late President Nasser.

From Hussein's point of view, the Gulf states' continued high oil production was slavishly pro-West and violated every principle of Arab nationalism. It deprived the Kuwaiti regime any claim of legitimacy. By conquering and annexing Kuwait, Hussein could simultaneously achieve two goals: erase the Iraqi debt to Kuwait and drive up the price of oil. Whatever else the invasion of Kuwait may have been, it was not irrational. So, in the predawn hours of August 2, 1990, he did it. Oil prices rose like a barometer in response to the threat of war.

The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq unleashed a frenzy of bellicose patriotism in the United States. Within days a marriage of convenience with a dictator was reversed; the divorce occasioned the swiftest and most massive military mobilization in history. Americans poured into Kuwait's large oil rich neighbor Saudi Arabia until they outnumbered the barrels of oil they were there to protect, joined by troops of several other nations fearful of losing their heartlines of oil which the invasion threatened, and waited five months to remove the muzzle from their monstrously powerful war machine. Homefront patriotism in the USA was cleverly staged, a yellow ribboned war fever that insisted all Americans support the troops sent to the Persian Gulf.

The actual war was anticlimactic: an intense bombing campaign of Baghdad and frontline Iraqi positions in Kuwait that left thousands dead — the American commanding general, the briefly lionized "Stormin Norman" Schwarzkopf, demanded that at least 50% of Iraqi troops be destroyed by air attacks before the ground war was to start; and when it did start it was a route that slaughtered still more thousands of Iraqi conscripts.

By seizing Kuwait, Saddam Hussein was reminiscent of local emirates or bandits who occasionally and ruthlessly choked off the ancient Silk Road and extorted tariffs and tolls until either Rome or China or some other displeased power (perhaps armed by one or the other Imperial) sent an army to chase the spoilers or usurpers off. In response to the invasion of Kuwait barrels of blood were offered in exchange for barrels of oil. The world has a glut of human blood but oil is finite and will likely dry up in this new century.

Weinberg wrote that "the U.S. consumes a highly disproportionate 30% of the world's oil. The notion that the U.S. as a 'democracy' has a 'right' to this oil, a right which 'madman' Hussein (demonized as a 'Hitler') is unworthy, holds little water for many observers in the Arab world and elsewhere."

Perhaps the greatest irony in the war that was to be called by Americans "Desert Storm," was in the fact, as Weinberg wrote, "the very thing being contested... is the same thing which is destroying our planet day by day — oil. With the world economy dependent on oil, even the peacetime economy is an incessant war on the biosphere. Oil is making the air of our urban areas unbreathable. Oil is contributing to the greenhouse effect and acid rain. Oil development is laying waste to pristine wilderness areas from northern Alaska to the rainforests of Latin America, contributing to the massive die-back in species diversity. Oil spills are fouling our coastlines from Prince William Sound to Staten Island. The ubiquitous use of oil-derived plastic packaging is creating solid-waste nightmares for our cities. Over reliance on oil-derived fertilizers is destroying the natural soil fertility of our vital agricultural heartland, threatening a second Dust Bowl..."

Weinberg wrote that this is the silent war, "the war on the planetary ecology that (was) waged continuously throughout the 20th century, accelerating horribly since World War 2, but which has only started to make headlines.

"The global economy which the U.S. is currently risking global war to protect is an economy that is daily propelling us into a global economic collapse, a future of dying forests, depleted soils and catastrophic climate shift."

Billy Hults again: "Until the world realizes the effect of oil and those who control it on the economy, environment and politics of each and every one of us, we are doomed to continuous war and environmental disaster. And that's the good news. With the current administration of the only remaining superpower controlled by oil men, we've reached the tipping point."

(MPMc)

THE OIL WAR MEMORIAL

The Oil War memorial should be black. It's a good color for war memorials. Black for the color of crude oil. Black for the hearts of those whose greed demands lives. Black for the filth they have smeared in our skies, bled on our beaches, excreted across our economies.


It should soar above our heads, like the Washington Monument or the Statue of Liberty. Its awesome mass will remind us of how small we puny citizens are to the privileged few. Those persons in government and industry who decided decades ago (and now) that we should follow the policies of waste and greed. A broad cylinder of featureless black, gently rimmed at a few regular spaces down its length. A vast oil drum. Perhaps a reflecting pool of the turgid liquid at its base. There should be no names on this one. Already its victims number in the billions. Billions whose lives have been adversely affected by the renewed frenzy over energy costs. Where is room for all those names?

The Monument should be in the center of a great circular amphitheater. It should be able to seat thousands to remind us of how we all watched the Gulf War unfold on the Flickering Blue Eye. Our government does not need to put things in our houses to watch us, they know where we are every night, and they tell us all what to believe.

It would be hard to send a replica of this Memorial all around the country as we did with the Vietnam Memorial. Instead, we could remember the war by reeducating ourselves. We could teach each other how to break the addiction to waste.

~LOUIS ALVIS
(NCTE, October 1990)

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