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# War Without End



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# **War Without End**

**The Iraq War in Context**

Michael Schwartz

In cooperation with TomDispatch

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*To my children and grandchildren,  
Shanna, Rebecca, Joshua, Julia, Katherine, Mizel, Judah, and Lila.*

*My generation set out to address and correct the world's problems.  
Instead we have bequeathed you dire crises.  
I hope this book makes a small contribution to your effort to redeem our failures.*





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# Introduction

*It is curious to see America, the United States, looking on herself, first, as a sort of natural peacemaker, then as a moral protagonist in this terrible time. No nation is less fitted for this role. For two or more centuries America has marched proudly in the van of human hatred—making bonfires of human flesh and laughing at them hideously, and making the insulting of millions more than a matter of dislike—rather a great religious world war-cry.*

— W. E. B. Du Bois, 1919

In the days just after September 11, 2001, as the United States rallied behind President George W. Bush and his newly initiated Global War on Terror, many people visualized the use of America's military might as a fast and efficient way to cut through the Gordian knot of international intrigue that protected Al-Qaeda and its terrorist cohort.

The idea in those days was to use America's military preeminence to depose rogue political regimes that provided the safe havens necessary for planning the next inevitable terrorist attacks on U.S. soil. It was said that a few successful thrusts would directly eliminate "states who sponsor terrorism" and quickly liquidate the terrorists they were harboring. The Bush administration identified as many as sixty countries that harbored Al Qaeda cells, and announced that U.S. officials had given each one "a stiff 'with us or against us' message: join 'an international coalition against terrorism' or pay the price.... Join the fight against Al Qaeda or 'be prepared to be bombed. Be prepared to go back to the Stone Age.'"<sup>1</sup>

The United States was thus embarking on a series of quick, effective assaults on various offending countries, a kind of international house-

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cleaning that would sweep through country after country. Even after Al Qaeda was liquidated, Secretary of State Colin Powell assured the world, the United States would continue with “a global assault on terrorism” that would last as long as necessary to contain or eradicate any threat to the U.S. “homeland.”<sup>2</sup> The saving grace of this potentially endless process was the merciless efficiency of the military instrument, which would guarantee that each battle was quickly won and painless for the United States.

In the imagery of the post-9/11 moment, the conquest of Afghanistan was an immediately successful first thrust; it removed and dismantled the Taliban government, and therefore eliminated Al Qaeda’s most important safe haven. Afghanistan’s reconstitution as Washington’s staunch ally was expected to proceed almost automatically, without conflict or significant investment.

A year later, the attack on Iraq became the next of these military thrusts, this one aimed at eliminating a second hydra head, the long-standing U.S. antagonist Saddam Hussein. In those days, according to the U.S. narrative, the war in Iraq was meant to be a sequel to the war in Afghanistan: efficient, precise, almost sanitary, and—most of all—quick. In a few months, with “major combat operations” successfully completed in Iraq, the job would be done and the next target, probably Iran or Syria, would be selected.

But something went wrong in that second battle. Before the invasion, Bush administration leaders offered a “Global War on Terror” rationale for their choice: left alone, Saddam Hussein would either arm Al Qaeda terrorists with weapons of mass destruction or use such weapons himself to attack the United States or its allies. This was most urgently expressed by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, who commented on CNN’s *Late Edition* that “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.”<sup>3</sup> President Bush was more modulated in his 2003 State of the Union address, delivered two months before the invasion: “America’s purpose...is to...the end of terrible threats to the civilized world. All free nations have a stake in preventing sudden and catastrophic attacks.”<sup>4</sup>

A year after the start of the Iraq War, any threat that might have existed of a Weapon of Mass Destruction attack had been foreclosed. Instead of ending on schedule, however, the war had been escalated from a regime-changing military thrust into a transformative historical enterprise, the “central battle in the war on terror.” Its new goals included implanting democracy in Iraq (and—by quick diffusion—the rest of the Middle East), the definitive defeat of Al Qaeda (fighting them there so “we won’t have to fight them here”), and the stabilization of the “arc of instability” that extended from the borders of China to the Horn of Africa.

With this change in status, the war in Iraq had morphed from a one-act performance of shock and awe into a full-length drama that could conceivably continue to the next millennium, with almost daily media images of bombings, beheadings, and torture in Iraq. To make matters worse, Afghanistan, the previously successful, quick “victory,” began to drag on, becoming a second endless war.

### **Justifying an Endless War**

By the time of Bush’s 2004 State of the Union address, a new rationale had gained pride of place in administration rhetoric. The imagery of the Global War on Terror receded, replaced by America’s destiny as bearer of democracy to Iraq and the Middle East: “As democracy takes hold in Iraq, the enemies of freedom will do all in their power to spread violence and fear. They are trying to shake the will of our country and our friends, but the United States of America will never be intimidated by thugs and assassins. The killers will fail, and the Iraqi people will live in freedom.” Three years later, the U. S. sponsored Iraqi government, riddled with visible corruption, despised by its constituency, and indelibly tied to sectarian warfare, had lost the luster of democracy. The rationale for the ongoing military campaign therefore migrated back to terrorism. This time, however, the appeal was devoid of the optimistic imagery of invincibility and quick victory. Instead of imagining the quick elimination of an impending threat, Bush’s 2007 State of the Union address invoked the prospect that an ongoing (perhaps endless) military presence in Iraq was necessary to forestall the otherwise inevitable development of new and far more dangerous forms of terrorism:

The consequences of failure are clear: Radical Islamic extremists would grow in strength and gain new recruits. They would be in a better position to topple moderate governments, create chaos in the region, and use oil revenues to fund their ambitions. Iran would be emboldened in its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Our enemies would have a safe haven from which to plan and launch attacks on the American people.<sup>5</sup>

The migrating goals for the continuing war were a telltale indicator that none of publicly stated justifications was fundamental to Washington’s intransigent determination to conquer Iraq. Had (Weapon’s of Mass Destruction (WMDs) been a primary motivation, the affirmation that Iraq had no such weapons should have led to a (perhaps embarrassed) disengagement or at least a modification of on-the-ground military strategy. Instead, the military campaign continued unmodified, with only the justification altered.

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Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz had explained these migrating public justifications back in 2001, when he told *Vanity Fair*'s Sam Tannenhaus that there were many reasons for the invasion, but — for public consumption—they “settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on, which was weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>6</sup> That is, the Bush administration used the argument that the predicted would be most effective in winning over public opinion. It is clear that at each stage they reapplied this same logic—cultivating public opinion with the most appealing argument they could muster at the moment, while remaining silent on other motivations that seemed less appealing.

This book is designed to scrutinize the full range of the Bush administration's ambitions in Iraq. When these hidden aspects of U.S. policy are made visible, they allow us to make sense of what would otherwise appear to be contradictory and paradoxical actions. Instead of seeing these contradictions as expressions of George W. Bush's twisted psyche or mistakes based on limited intelligence, we can discern instead how the choices made at each juncture reflect these enduring ambitions.

In order to understand these policies, we need to look beyond the periodic spectacles that have punctuated the war and scrutinize the day-to-day events that reflect set goals and produce long-term consequences. In order to understand these day-to-day events, we need to look beyond the pervasive impact of a brutal military occupation to the equally pervasive impact of an equally brutal economic policy.

Bush's 2007 State of the Union address, quoted above, mentioned oil in an oblique but nevertheless instructive way, suggesting that control of oil was a critical determinant in Washington's campaign to convert Iraq militarily from a regional adversary to U.S. outpost.

Bush's assertion that U.S. withdrawal would allow Islamic extremists to “use oil revenues to fund their ambitions” points to a twenty-first-century fact of life—that oil had come to play the role that gold had played in earlier epochs. In the Age of Discovery, many countries and private citizens spent precious resources and fought brutal wars, particularly in North and South America, for access to and control over gold, with the expectation that success would yield not only wealth, but also power on the world stage. Many Centuries later, oil came to play the same role. By the early twentieth century, the oil-rich Middle East—which for several hundred years had been little more than a way station in international affairs—re emerged as a focal point of big-power politics. As former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan commented: “The intense attention of the developed world to Middle Eastern political affairs has always been critically tied to oil security.”<sup>7</sup>

In this context, the invasion of Iraq was no different from all the previous iterations of Western intervention in the Middle East: the control of Iraqi oil was a prime goal of the invasion, and this control could only be assured if three intermediate outcomes were achieved: a thoroughgoing revision of the way Iraq managed its economy (so that oil could be quickly and efficiently extracted), willing participation by the Iraqi people in this transformation (no matter how much it disrupted or degraded their lives), and an ongoing, dominant military presence (to protect against domestic and foreign resistance to these and other changes that Washington hoped to implement). At the same time, control of Iraq and its oil was itself an intermediate goal in a more comprehensive foreign policy: the establishment of the United States as the preeminent power in the Middle East.

### **The Paradox of Shock and Awe**

The war began with what military strategists called the “shock and awe” campaign, which the U.S. media portrayed as a kind of fireworks show, featuring spectacular visuals of explosions in and around Baghdad. Residents of Baghdad experienced it as an enduring nightmare, magnitudes worse than the infamous blitzkrieg of London.<sup>8</sup>

The military rationale for such a strategy lay in its potential to demoralize the soldiers and citizens of the enemy country. In the circumstances just preceding the invasion—with the bulk of the Iraqi population sullenly anti-government and the military on the verge of collapse—the use of such a strategy would have appeared to be at best unnecessary. At worst, it ran the risk of rallying the Iraqis around their once-hated government and thus stiffening the resistance.

But if we reference the ambitions of U.S. foreign policy, we can better discern the logic of the attack. As Naomi Klein has meticulously documented, a particular logic was enshrined in the economic, political, and military thinking of Washington policy makers. Stated bluntly, this thinking asserts that sudden devastating shocks—whether a large-scale society-wide natural disaster affecting the entire nation or an individual’s traumatic injury—make groups and individuals more compliant with disruptions and degradations of their lives.<sup>9</sup> Given the intention to revolutionize Iraq society, demoralizing the population might prove as a useful anesthetic.

Viewed through this lens, the “shock and awe” campaign that preceded the invasion makes sense: It can be seen as a softening process that would induce compliance among Iraqi citizens with the radical transformation of their society from a Baathist state-dominated dictatorship to

a fully globalized, market-driven ally of the United States. A short review of the events of that campaign will introduce us to the reality behind “shock and awe,” and to its connection to the immediate post-invasion attempt at economic revolution.

### **Shock and Awe**

The shock-and-awe strategy was developed in the 1990s by Harlan K. Ullman, a U.S. Navy commander and an influential National War College professor, as a way to “control the adversary’s will.” Rapid and overwhelming physical and human destruction would, he theorized, “induce sufficient shock-and-awe to render the adversary impotent.”

When the concept of shock and awe became a part of public discourse during the run-up to the Iraq invasion, Ullman was asked by CBS correspondent David Martin to portray its projected role in the imminent assault on Iraq. He emphasized that successful occupation of Iraq would depend on annihilating both the physical infrastructure of the country and its military capability. He compared shock and awe to the nuclear attack on Hiroshima:

We want them to quit. We want them not to fight,” Ullman told CBS, explaining that the concept relied on a “simultaneous effect, rather like the nuclear weapons at Hiroshima, not taking days or weeks but in minutes.... You’re sitting in Baghdad, and all of a sudden, you’re the general and Thirty of your division headquarters have been wiped out. You also take the city down. By that, I mean you get rid of their power, water. In two, three, four, five days they are physically, emotionally, and psychologically exhausted.”<sup>10</sup>

Some of the novel components in this strategy are worth noting. First, we should consider the lack of differentiation between military and civilian space. Targets are no longer to be selected according to their military value, but because they have the potential to induce physical, emotional, and psychological exhaustion. Any target, populated or unpopulated, functional or decorative, public or private, urban or rural, could be appropriate to this purpose.<sup>11</sup>

Such undifferentiated targeting would normally be considered a violation of long-established international law prohibiting civilian targets, but a second innovation by shock-and-awe theorists sidestepped this issue. In modern society, most infrastructure (for example, the power grid, the network of highways, the water purification system, and a multi-tenant office district) is simultaneously used for civilian and military purposes (known in military jargon as “dual use” facilities). In principle then this legitimizes

them as military targets. Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Rizer, an air-power strategist, commented on how shock-and-awe advocates exploit this ambiguity to justify attacks on civilian morale:

The U.S. Air Force perspective is that when attacking power sources, transportation, networks, and telecommunications systems, distinguishing between the military and civilian aspects of these facilities is virtually impossible.... Since these targets remain critical military nodes...they are viewed as legitimate military targets....

By declaring dual-use targets legitimate military objectives, the air force can directly target civilian morale. In sum, so long as the air force includes civilian morale as a legitimate military target, it will aggressively maintain a right to attack dual-use targets.<sup>12</sup>

This, in turn, produces a third momentous aspect of shock and awe: that the target population experiences deepening devastation over months and even years after the attack has been completed. As Ruth Blakeley has argued, it is really a “bomb now, die later” policy,<sup>13</sup> since the degraded infrastructure becomes the incubator for a declining quality of life.

Disrupted electrical generation undermines every aspect of social life. Polluted water yields water-borne illness and devastated crops. Direct attacks on crops and the disruption of irrigation yield a declining food supply. A depleted hospital system combined with declining public health creates all manner of medical care crises, including drastic increases in infant mortality. Without vast and comprehensive reconstruction, the impact of shock and awe can continue to deepen over many years.

Finally, the initial devastation combines with this infrastructural decline to undermine the economic viability of the target country. This results in what can best be described as de-modernization: urban areas especially lose their capacity to sustain the sorts of facilities that constitute modern society, and they slowly or quickly devolve into the “slum cities” that characterize much of the global South.<sup>14</sup> Stephen Graham has argued that this effect is a key feature of shock-and-awe warfare:

The forced de-modernization of cities and urban societies through state infrastructural warfare is emerging as a central component of contemporary military strategy.... Vast military research and development efforts are fueling a widening range of “hard” and “soft” anti-infrastructural weapons...carefully designed to destroy, or disrupt, the multiple networked infrastructures that together allow cities within modern “network societies” to function.<sup>15</sup>

These damaging consequences were wholly inconsistent with the initially stated goals of the war: the surgical removal of Saddam Hussein (who was hated by his own people) and the creation of a responsive government that would attack neither its own citizens nor any outsiders.

The outcome of such a surgical removal could best (and perhaps only) be managed if minimum physical damage were caused, allowing the new government to quickly become effective while minimizing psychological damage, so that Iraqi citizens could begin to act on their own behalf after decades of repression.

If however we view the war in light of the political-economic goals of the United States in the Middle East, the physical and psychological devastation of a shock-and-awe campaign begin to make sense. As we will discuss in detail in chapters 1–4, Washington’s larger goals centered around transforming Iraq from a state-controlled system to a radically privatized economy that would ratchet up oil production by transferring investment and management of the oil fields to the cash-rich and technologically advanced international oil companies. This sort of transformation was certain to generate ferocious resistance at all levels of Iraqi society. Moreover, it was also certain to generate resistance in neighboring countries, whose governments would see these changes as foreshadowing U.S. demands for similar reforms in their respective countries.

Shock and awe held out the possibility of significantly reducing all this resistance. A brutal military campaign that left the Iraqi people “physically, emotionally, and psychologically exhausted” would pave the way for compliant acceptance of radical economic transformation. In fact, this ambition fit neatly into what social analyst Naomi Klein has identified as the “shock doctrine,” an economic reform strategy originally enunciated by Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman: “Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change.”<sup>16</sup>

As she surveyed the history of the late twentieth century, Klein found that Friedman’s insight had been applied repeatedly in introducing the sort of economic reform that Washington sought to introduce in Iraq. Over a three-decade period starting in the 1970s—Chile, and then in Poland, China, Great Britain, Russia, South Africa, and numerous countries impacted by the tsunami of 2004—economic shock therapy was introduced in the aftermath of political, economic, and natural upheavals.

In 2003 Iraq became a new example of this strategy:

First came the war, designed, according to the authors of the Shock and Awe military doctrine, to “control the adversary’s will, perceptions and understanding and literally make an adversary impotent to act or react.” Next came the radical economic shock therapy, imposed, while the country was still in flames, by the U.S. chief envoy, L. Paul Bremer.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the initial attack, which might have made the process of military conquest more difficult, was designed to pave the way for a relatively uncontested economic transformation, an example of what Klein calls



“disaster capitalism.” Even the long-term infrastructural devastation was functional: It cleared away the outmoded existing equipment and facilitated its replacement with the proprietary “state of the art” facilities favored by the foreign companies who would undertake the reconstruction and development of the new Iraq.

### **The Failure of Shock and Awe**

Ironically, the Iraq War did not initially feature a fully developed anti-infrastructural attack of the sort that Ullman felt was necessary to stun and intimidate the enemy.<sup>18</sup> While there was extensive damage to transportation, sewage, and communication, it was not systematic. The United States did not, for example, directly target water purification plants during the initial invasion; the vast majority of them were unharmed and electricity was still on in Baghdad.<sup>19</sup> Ullman himself complained that it “did not bring the great Shock and Awe that we had envisaged.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps as a result of this moderation in the original plan, there was little overt bitterness when the U.S. military arrived in Baghdad and other cities that had been subjected to the modified shock-and-awe campaign. The initial round of violence involved looting and other actions aimed at targets other than the occupation forces.

On the other hand, resistance began to grow as soon as the social and economic impact of the occupation was felt; that is, as Iraqis grew increasingly suspicious that Washington was intending to occupy and transform the country, rather than liberate and reconstruct it. Looking at the situation from the point of view of shock-and-awe advocates, then, the campaign proved insufficient to pave the way for the economic reforms that L. Paul Bremer sought to enact while the “adversary” was still “impotent to act or react.”<sup>21</sup>

As time went on and the economic reforms took their toll, the insurgency increased in breadth and depth, and in its willingness to undertake increasingly violent and destructive methods to expel the occupation forces. This resistance, both in the Sunni areas of active insurgency and in the more quiescent but still rebellious Shia areas, further frustrated efforts to implement economic reform and to ratchet up oil production.

At the end of 2003 the insurgency had become powerful enough to force the Bush administration into a difficult policy choice: to abandon the plan to reform Iraq—and the rest of the Middle East—or to “stay the course.” At that moment early in the war against the insurgency, and at each juncture afterward, the Bush administration opted for the full application of military force to rescue the larger plan. Each new strategy

sought to achieve what the initial attack had not achieved: to “induce sufficient Shock and Awe to render the adversary impotent,” and thus make the population compliant to Washington’s policy.<sup>22</sup>

In this way, it was the underlying political-economic ambitions of the Bush administration that determined the strategies adopted by the U.S. military in Iraq. The military campaigns were, in each iteration, needed because they were the only possible way to achieve the political-economic goals. The evolving arguments used to justify the continued military campaigns did not, therefore, reflect evolving goals, but were instead selected as the best choices to win over evolving public opinion.

### **What Went Wrong?**

On the third anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, when U.S. newspapers and TV news reports were filled with retrospectives on the origins of the Iraq War, the question of “what went wrong” in Iraq was almost universally answered as follows:

The invasion was initially successful, but the plan for the peace was faulty. Bush administration officials misestimated the amount of resistance they would encounter in the wake of Baghdad’s fall, and did not deploy sufficient soldiers to definitively suppress the attacks mounted by remnants of the Hussein regime. This blunder allowed what was at best a modest insurgency to grow to formidable proportions, at which point the occupation officials were confronted with the consequences of a second blunder: the dismantling of the Iraqi army, which otherwise could have been deployed to suppress the rebellion.

The bottom line? Army Chief of Staff, General Eric Shinseki, was correct when he recommended before the war that the U.S. should deploy several hundred thousand troops to lock down the country. Had this been done, the rebellion would have been quickly quelled, and the U.S. occupation would have looked more like those of Japan and Germany after World War II.<sup>23</sup>

The problem with this theory—and with the shock-and-awe theory it replaced—was that it underestimated the ultimate resistance to the transformations that Washington tried to implement in Iraq. If either theory were correct, the lack of U.S. troops and the deep chaos created by initial lawlessness and mass looting should have provoked immediate and violent expression of anti-occupation feeling. The fact that there were almost no attacks against the U.S. military at first and that the insurgency only began to build momentum in fall 2003 suggests that other, non-military factors developed during that early period, factors that did not exist when the United States initially took the reigns of government.

To understand the powerful resistance that emerged after that first quiescent period and then continued to amplify for years afterward, we

must search for a complex of non-military factors that energized the evolution of social chaos into a guerrilla war aimed at expelling the U.S. military from Iraq. We must in particular ponder the size and resilience of the insurgency, which persisted and grew magnitudes stronger despite the escalating application of overwhelming firepower.

It is here that the accepted wisdom of the U.S. media is grossly inaccurate. The resistance did not arise because of inadequate troops or the absence of a coherent plan; it derived, instead, from the implementation of a familiar formula designed to transform Iraq into a beachhead for U.S. economic and political preeminence in the Middle East. The centerpiece of this transformation was a by then familiar set of policies, known in international development circles as “neoliberal structural adjustment,” that had taken decades to complete in other countries. This attempted transformation had a devastating impact on Iraqi society: within a few months Iraqi cities were—as urban historian Mike Davis labeled the process—“rushing backwards to the age of Dickens”—and within three years they had already arrived.<sup>24</sup>

By 2006 Iraqi agriculture was gutted and most Iraqi cities were flooded with new migrants looking for work. The cities, for their part, had lost their historic economic centers of gravity. With their manufacturing sectors idling or decayed, a huge proportion of urban residents were unable to find or keep their jobs. Those who were working had suffered major declines in income that rendered them incapable of affording the imported products and services that now dominated the economy. In short, the cities were populated by an economically marginal population mired in a downward spiral of poverty and desperation. Many became unmoored—jobless and/or homeless—and left for other countries or other Iraqi cities seeking a new beginning.

It was this process that produced the real war in Iraq—the one that occurred after Bush’s declaration that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended.”<sup>25</sup>

To understand why things went so wrong—why the quick conquest that was supposed to be battle number two in the endlessly successful Global War on Terror became an endlessly unsuccessful war of its own—we need to heed what President Bush said just after the much-quoted beginning of his victory speech. The very next sentence was “And now our coalition is engaged in securing and reconstructing that country.” It was in fact the process of “securing and reconstructing” Iraq that produced the war without end.



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Part I

# The Almost Invisible Goals of the War in Iraq



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Chapter One

# The Oily Origins of the War in Iraq

*I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq War is largely about oil.*

—Alan Greenspan, former chairman, Federal Reserve

*An American-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and the replacement of the radical Baathist dictatorship with a new government more closely aligned with the United States, would put America more wholly in charge of the region than any power since the Ottomans, or maybe even the Romans.*

—David Frum, presidential speechwriter

The United States viewed Middle East oil as a precious prize long before the Iraq War.<sup>1</sup> Intense attention to the region—from the entire Western world—started with the discovery of huge, easily accessed petroleum fields just at the time when oil became the central resource in industrial life. As a consequence, the Middle East was an important theater of operations during the first World War, with Great Britain emerging as the biggest shareholder of the Middle East reservoirs of “black gold” and the arbiter of the peace settlement that created Iraq as a country. From then on, the region became an uninterrupted focal point of economic, political, and military intrigue (as well as open warfare), with Iraq a key part of the equation.<sup>2</sup>

## **The United States, Saudi Arabia, and OPEC**

By the Second World War that interest was in full bloom. When British officials declared Middle East oil “a vital prize for any power interested in

world influence or domination,” U.S. officials seconded the thought, calling it “a stupendous source of strategic power and one of the greatest material prizes in world history.”<sup>3</sup>

This concern for control of Middle East oil led to a scramble for access during and after the war. The United States staked a claim as the preeminent power of the future when President Franklin Roosevelt successfully negotiated an “oil for protection” agreement with King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> That was in 1945. From then on, the United States became actively (if often secretly) engaged in most of the major events in the region, including the overthrow of a democratically elected Iranian government in 1953 to reverse the nationalization of Iran’s oil fields, and the fateful establishment of a Baathist Party dictatorship in Iraq in the early 1960s to prevent the ascendance of leftists who, it was feared, would align the country with the Soviet Union, putting its oil in hock to the Soviet bloc.

U.S. influence in the Middle East began to wane in the 1970s, when the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) first proved itself able to coordinate the production and pricing of oil on a worldwide basis.<sup>5</sup> OPEC’s power was consolidated as various countries nationalized their oil holdings and wrested decision making away from the Western-owned oil giants that had previously dominated exploration, extraction, pricing, and sales of black gold.

Once all the key oil exporters joined OPEC, it began formally deciding how much oil would be extracted and sold in international markets. After the group established that all members were willing to follow collective decisions—because even one major dissenter might fatally undermine the ability to turn the “spigot” on or off—it could use the threat of production restrictions or the promise of expansion to bargain with its most powerful trading partners. In effect, a new power bloc had emerged on the international scene that could exact tangible concessions even from the United States and the Soviet Union, the two superpowers of the time.

Though the United States was largely self-sufficient in oil when OPEC was first formed, its economy was still tied to trading partners, particularly Japan and Europe, which were dependent on Middle Eastern oil. The oil crises of the 1970s, including the seemingly endless gas lines in the United States, demonstrated OPEC’s power.

OPEC’s rise to prominence significantly enhanced the importance of the long-term alliance with the Saudi royal family. With the largest petroleum reserves on the planet and the largest production capacity among OPEC members, Saudi Arabia was capable of shaping the cartel’s policies to conform to its wishes. In response to this simple but essential fact, suc-



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