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A War for Oil?; [Op-Ed]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Our family spent winter vacation in Colorado, and one day I saw the most unusual site: two women marching around the Aspen Mountain ski lift, waving signs protesting against war in Iraq. One sign said: "Just War or Just Oil?" As I watched this two-woman demonstration, I couldn't help notice the auto traffic whizzing by them: one gas-guzzling S.U.V. or Jeep after another, with even a Humvee or two tossed in for good measure. The whole scene made me wonder whether those two women weren't -- indeed -- asking the right question: Is the war that the Bush team is preparing to launch in Iraq really a war for oil?

I say this possible Iraq war is partly about oil because it is impossible to explain the Bush team's behavior otherwise. Why are they going after Saddam Hussein with the 82nd Airborne and North Korea with diplomatic kid gloves -- when North Korea already has nuclear weapons, the missiles to deliver them, a record of selling dangerous weapons to anyone with cash, 100,000 U.S. troops in its missile range and a leader who is even more cruel to his own people than Saddam?

"Would those women protesting in Aspen prefer that Saddam Hussein control the oil instead -- is that morally better?" asks Michael Mandelbaum, the Johns Hopkins foreign policy expert and author of "The Ideas That Conquered the World." "Up to now, Saddam has used his oil wealth not to benefit his people, but to wage war against all his neighbors, build lavish palaces and acquire weapons of mass destruction."

Full Text (837 words)

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Our family spent winter vacation in Colorado, and one day I saw the most unusual site: two women marching around the Aspen Mountain ski lift, waving signs protesting against war in Iraq. One sign said: "Just War or Just Oil?" As I watched this two-woman demonstration, I couldn't help notice the auto traffic whizzing by them: one gas-guzzling S.U.V. or Jeep after another, with even a Humvee or two tossed in for good measure. The whole scene made me wonder whether those two women weren't -- indeed -- asking the right question: Is the war that the Bush team is preparing to launch in Iraq really a war for oil?

My short answer is yes. Any war we launch in Iraq will certainly be -- in part -- about oil. To deny that is laughable. But whether it is seen to be only about oil will depend on how we behave before an invasion and what we try to build once we're there.

I say this possible Iraq war is partly about oil because it is impossible to explain the Bush team's behavior otherwise. Why are they going after Saddam Hussein with the 82nd Airborne and North Korea with diplomatic kid gloves -- when North Korea already has nuclear weapons, the missiles to deliver them, a record of selling dangerous weapons to anyone with cash, 100,000 U.S. troops in its missile range and a leader who is even more cruel to his own people than Saddam?

One reason, of course, is that it is easier to go after Saddam. But the other reason is oil -- even if the president doesn't want to admit it. (Mr. Bush's recent attempt to hype the Iraqi threat by saying that an Iraqi attack on America -- which is most unlikely -- "would cripple our economy" was embarrassing. It made the president look as if he was groping for an excuse to go to war, absent a smoking gun.)

Let's cut the nonsense. The primary reason the Bush team is more focused on Saddam is because if he were to acquire weapons of mass destruction, it might give him the leverage he has long sought -- not to attack us, but to extend his influence over the world's largest source of oil, the Persian Gulf.

But wait a minute. There is nothing illegitimate or immoral about the U.S. being concerned that an evil, megalomaniacal dictator might acquire excessive influence over the natural resource that powers the world's industrial base.

"Would those women protesting in Aspen prefer that Saddam Hussein control the oil instead -- is that morally better?" asks Michael Mandelbaum, the Johns Hopkins foreign policy expert and author of "The Ideas That Conquered the World." "Up to now, Saddam has used his oil wealth not to benefit his people, but to wage war against all his neighbors, build lavish palaces and acquire weapons of mass destruction."

This is a good point, but the Bush team would have a stronger case for fighting a war partly for oil if it made clear by its behavior that it was acting for the benefit of the planet, not simply to fuel American excesses.

I have no problem with a war for oil -- if we accompany it with a real program for energy conservation. But when we tell the world that we couldn't care less about climate change, that we feel entitled to drive whatever big cars we feel like, that we feel entitled to consume however much oil we like, the message we send is that a war for oil in the gulf is not a war to protect the world's right to economic survival -- but our right to indulge. Now that will be seen as immoral.

And should we end up occupying Iraq, and the first thing we do is hand out drilling concessions to U.S. oil companies alone, that perception would only be intensified.

And that leads to my second point. If we occupy Iraq and simply install a more pro-U.S. autocrat to run the Iraqi gas station (as we have in other Arab oil states), then this war partly for oil would also be immoral.

If, on the other hand, the Bush team, and the American people, prove willing to stay in Iraq and pay the full price, in money and manpower, needed to help Iraqis build a more progressive, democratizing Arab state -- one that would use its oil income for the benefit of all its people and serve as a model for its neighbors -- then a war partly over oil would be quite legitimate. It would be a critical step toward building a better Middle East.

So, I have no problem with a war for oil -- provided that it is to fuel the first progressive Arab regime, and not just our S.U.V.'s, and provided we behave in a way that makes clear to the world we are protecting everyone's access to oil at reasonable prices -- not simply our right to binge on it.

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