

Literature Review

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History 299
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October 21st, 2012.

On January 16, 1991 the United States military and other U.N. coalition forces launched Operation Desert Storm against Saddam Hussein and Iraq. After five weeks of intense bombings and air strikes and a one hundred hour-long ground war, the fight was over¹. The United States had won one of the most lopsided military endeavors ever. It is interesting to note that just three years previously during the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from 1980-1988, the U.S. provided supplies to Iraq and even fought against Iran to protect Iraq's interests². Economics, especially in the form of oil, played a fundamental role in shaping U.S. interest in the Persian Gulf during this time period. Many authors written works trying to analyze and understand the factors that were key to American involvement in these wars. Most authors make the same point about the key role that oil played during these tumultuous times while then focusing on different aspects of these conflicts. It is very difficult to divide these readings into factions, mainly due to the fact that only 20 years have passed since Operation Desert Storm. By looking at these different sources closely, one can see the differing emphasis that the writers place on oil in regards to the outbreak of violence in the Iran-Iraq war and the 1st Persian Gulf War. While other factors could be argued by some to be more relevant, it is clear by looking at secondary sources on this subject that emphasis on oil as the key motivation for this conflict is a much stronger argument.

The first faction places more of an emphasis on factors other than oil when describing the causation of U.S. military intervention in Iraq. The author of *Spider's Web: The Secret History of How the White House Illegally Armed Iraq* (1993), Alan Friedman, fits into this

¹ Deese, David A. "Persian Gulf War: Desert Storm - War with Iraq."
<http://www.laughtergenealogy.com/bin/histprof/misc/desertstorm.html>

² Alan Friedman, *Spider's Web: The Secret History of How the White House Illegally Armed Iraq* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), xviii.

first faction. Friedman as a member of the press has won the British equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize four times. Clearly Friedman is quite reputable as an author and journalist. He broke much of the story shown in this book at the time it was occurring as a reporter for NBC, giving him first-hand experience with the topic. Friedman backs his writing with almost 70 pages of notes and bibliographic information, much of which is primary. Many of the sources in *Spider's Web* are quotes from interviews as well as much correspondence between key political figures involved. Friedman sets out in this piece of investigative journalism to prove that the U.S. Government, along with the UK and other European allies, abused their power overseas by aiding the Iraqi government, which in turn prolonged the Iran-Iraq war of the late 80's and paved the way to the Gulf war in the early 90's³. Friedman argues more about the U.S. abusing its power overseas rather than discussing the role that oil played.

Similarly to Friedman Kenneth Timmerman, who wrote *The Death Lobby: How the West Armed Iraq* (1991) puts less of an emphasis on the role oil had in causing the Persian Gulf War. Timmerman, a well-known journalist and author, has spent a lot of time in the Middle East and is an expert on the arms dealings of the region. The thesis that Timmerman sets forth in his work is that oil was not the main reason for going to war against Iraq in 1990. Rather, it was because the U.S. and other European allies had to stop the 'death machine' that was Saddam Hussein⁴. Timmerman argues that the income from selling arms to Iraq was too great and caused such greed in the West (U.S, France, Germany, Britain) that it blinded them from the tyranny of Saddam. When Saddam got closer to the creation of a nuclear bomb in

³ Friedman, *Spider's Web*, 286.

⁴ Kenneth R. Timmerman, *The Death Lobby: How the West Armed Iraq* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), x-xii.

1990, that was when action needed to be taken. Unlike Freidman though, Timmerman completely rejects the idea that oil played a fundamental role in the armament and subsequent invasion of Iraq by Western forces⁵. Timmerman also puts much more of an emphasis on German and French involvement than any other writer.

The second faction in this debate can be seen first be by Michael T. Klare's *Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Petroleum Dependency* (2004). This book sets forth the argument that resources lie at the of root modern day conflicts and that oil in particular had the potential to spark armed violence, especially in regards to the U.S. in the Middle East⁶. Klare sets forth a well-articulated argument that focuses mainly on the importance of oil to the United States and how that importance led them into this turning on Iraq. Klare argues that this reliance on oil as justification for involvement in the Persian Gulf was not a secret, like Freidman argues, but was vocalized as publicly as the Carter doctrine⁷. This book, being the only one in this review having been written after the second U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, plays to the elevated interest in Iraq at the time and especially to the role that oil was playing in that conflict.

Abbas Alnasrawi, who wrote *Iraq's Burden: Oil, Sanctions and Underdevelopment* (2002) supports this second faction. Alnasrawi, a credible professor, has written two other books on this same topic, which he even cites in this work. In *Iraq's Burden*, Alnasrawi gives great perspective on the Iraqi economy from the viewpoint of the Iraqis themselves, unlike any of the other readings. Written in 2002, after 9/11 and tensions were rising with Iraq,

⁵ Timmerman, *Death Lobby*, 392-397.

⁶ Michael T. Klare, *Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Petroleum Dependency* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), xii- xvi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-25.

Alnasrawi wants to show the Iraqi side of the conflict while focusing on oil. He follows the rise of Iraq's oil industry from the beginning. Alnasrawi states a thesis that oil was the direct cause for Iraq and Saddam to invade Kuwait, which resulted in U.S. involvement. While there may have been a historical conflict between Iraq and Kuwait, it was not until Iraq felt threatened by Kuwait's lowering of oil prices that battle began⁸. One thing that the book does not discuss in any great detail is American and other Western support for Iraq before Iraq invades Kuwait, which leaves the reader questioning the extent to which the U.S. was involved in the Iraqi oil industry.

Robert Freedman edited a collection of essays in *The Middle East After Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait* (1993). The essays that pertain directly to the U.S. armament and subsequent coalition invasion of Iraq are the Introduction by Robert Freedman, "The Persian Gulf War: A Political-Military Assessment" by Bard E. O'Neill and Ilana Kass, and "U.S. Policy Toward the Middle East after Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait" by Robert Hunter. These essays do a good job of widening perspective on the topic as well as supporting the second faction by showing the fundamental role of oil⁹. All of the contributors of these sections come from excellent academic backgrounds. All of the contributors have sufficient credentials on the topic at hand. These articles make similar arguments that oil played a key role in the causing of hostilities. With Iraq seeing Kuwait exceed its OPEC oil quota and keeping oil prices low, conflict arose. These readings uniquely cite the neutrality of the U.S. right before Iraq invaded Kuwait as tensions were rising. The U.S. did not want to pick a side and possibly destabilize the region. Even though the U.S. had supported Iraq against Iran a few years

⁸ Abbas Alnasrawi. *Iraq's Burden: Oil, Sanctions and Underdevelopment* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2002), 61-69.

⁹ Robert O. Freedman, *The Middle East After Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1993), 1-14.

earlier, stability in the region and stability of oil production was the main concern for the U.S.¹⁰.

The Prize again supports the claim that oil was the fundamental factor for U.S. involvement in these conflicts. Written by Daniel Yergin in 1991, *The Prize*, gives a great deal of background information into the history of the oil industry itself and describes how it can be used as a catalyst for war in general. One of the main points that the author tries to make is that oil was central to the conflict between the U.S and Iraq. Oil led Saddam to want to control the Persian Gulf and start the conflict with Iran in the Iran-Iraq war, and the threat of Saddam controlling too much oil is what caused the U.S. -led coalition to react in the Gulf War¹¹. *The Prize* uses a great deal of interviews with heads of the oil industry from around the world as well as key political figures from this time. Yergin also relies heavily on primary sources such as government documents.

Lastly, Howard Teicher argues in *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm* (1993) that again, oil was a key objective for U.S. during the Iran-Iraq war as well as Desert Storm¹². Teicher, who served as director for Political Military Affairs on President Reagan's National Security Council, gives the reader an insider's perspective on the dealing by the U.S. during this time period. He takes a very critical position of the political administration of Reagan and Bush with their dealings in the Middle East. This stance in the book is almost too critical and distracts from the facts at certain points. According to Teicher, oil had always been a key objective of U.S. foreign policy in the Persian Gulf, which created a flawed outlook of the

¹⁰ Ibid, 18-71.

¹¹ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money & Power* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 690-747.

¹² Howard Teicher, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm: America's Flaws vision in the Middle East From Nixon to Bush* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1993), 25-26.

Middle East¹³. Tiecher goes on to cite many examples of American actions in the region, all of which, was designed to secure the flow oil out of the region during this time period.

By looking at different secondary sources on the topic two different conclusions can be drawn. These factions argue whether oil was a fundamental interest to the U.S. in their actions towards Iraq or it was not as key as many have thought. By reading these sources it becomes clear the argument that oil has had a tremendous effect on the U.S. foreign policy in the Persian Gulf, especially in regards to Iraq from the 80's to the early 90's, is the stronger case. While reading these sources some questions can arise. The 10-year gap that is clearly seen in the dates of the writings show interest peaked right after the first gulf war in the early 90's and picks up again in the early 2000's after the U.S. becomes involved with Iraq again. Why is the idea of oil in regards to Iraq only an interest during times of war and not during the time between these two conflicts? If more of an interest was taken during this 10-year period could it have changed the way Americans were involved in the Persian Gulf in the 2000's?

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¹³ Howard Teicher, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm*, 393-396.

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