

Oil, Power and Empire: Iraq and the U.S. Global Agenda

By [Scott D. O'Reilly](#)

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Plato wrote that the greatest political calamity imaginable was the divided state where you have one half of the population triumphing, and the other half plunged into grief. Today Plato's warning applies most manifestly to the globe itself, with the relationship between the first and third world - between the haves and have nots - duplicating the tragic and precarious conditions described by the west's most influential political philosopher more than 2,000 years ago.

Larry Everest, author of timely and well-argued book, "Oil, Power, & Empire: Iraq and the U.S. Global Agenda," outlines many of the catastrophic consequences that invariably follow when the world is divided into imperial exploiters and suppressed colonies. His book arrives at a propitious moment, at a time when the United States under the Bush administration is unabashedly assuming the mantle of a global empire with the aim of securing natural resources for its own consumption while ensuring strategic rivals and indigenous peoples remain unable to contest American hegemony.

But the Bush administration's attempts to establish a *Pax Americana* are not, as Everest contends, a radical deviation from past U.S. policies, so much as a dramatic acceleration of longstanding imperial hubris. A study of the U.S. role in The Middle East over the last half-century, and Iraq in particular, reveals the shortsighted, self-serving and wantonly destructive character of America's involvement in the region. In no small measure, Everest argues the terrorist threat the United States now faces has arisen from the oppression and exploitation the our government has sanctioned in the Middle East.

The complications, contradictions, and consequences from America's dysfunctional relationship with the Middle East are nowhere more sadly illustrated than the heartrending case of Iraq. The official Washington narrative has the United States intervening twice in the birthplace of civilization, first to repel an unprovoked invasion by the brutal tyrant Saddam Hussein, and second to depose the dictator in an effort to bring democracy to a beleaguered Iraq. Everest lays out a comprehensive and persuasively argued alternative narrative that completely debunks America's self-aggrandizing delusion that it has been a benevolent force in Iraq or the region.

The study of history is valuable because the past is often prologue, and Everest provides one of the most trenchant, concise, and useful accounts of U.S. involvement in the Gulf over the past half-century, as well as the experience of the British Empire in the region going back to the First World War.

Oil, in fact, was an indispensable factor that fueled the allied victories in WWI and WW II,

and control of this strategically and economically vital resource has remained a dominant concern among elites managing and overseeing empires. The British recognized that their ability to control and exploit this vital resource rested on their ability 'divide and conquer,' so to speak the indigenous Arab fiefdoms, ensuring oil resources could be diverted for their own imperial needs while their Arab colonies like Iraq remained weak and compliant.

This could not, of course, be accomplished without a high degree of morality laundering. When the British forces entered Baghdad in 1917 their commander Sir Stanley Maude explained the occupation as follows:

"Our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators . . . [so]the Arab race may rise once more to greatness." Things didn't quite work out as promised, in large measure because the victories allied powers in WWI were busy carving up the Middle East into spheres of influence to exploit for their colonial ends. When the Iraqis realized what was happening their response was a widespread insurgency that was crushed by British forces using artillery shells containing poison gas, prompting Winston Churchill to refer to Iraq as that "ungrateful volcano."

The British soon found Iraq virtually unmanageable, so they simply installed a puppet government, extracted the most generous oil concessions they could, kept their troops garrisoned in Iraq to back up the despised monarchy and protect British interests, most often by air power. Ever since, Everest argues, "Iraq has been a testing ground for the tactics - and crimes - of empire."

The U.S. have simply picked up where the British left off according to Everest. After WWII as the British Empire waned the U.S. was determined to fill the void in the Middle East and secure the region's vast petroleum resources to fulfill its own imperial designs. Everest describes in compelling detail how control of oil translates into vast economic and military power, providing the means to accumulate leverage over rivals abroad and accumulate wealth at home.

Contrary to the Bush administration's contentions that the war on Iraq was about Saddam's WMD or part of the broader 'war on terror' Everest contends that invading Iraq was all about extending America's empire. More precisely, Everest argues, securing Iraq's oil reserves was a way of 'escaping forward,' that is a way of escaping some of the contradictions of empire, most particularly America's increasing vulnerability because of its reliance on foreign oil and foreign capital to fuel its consumptive binge. Or as Everest baldly puts it, to use America's military might to attain economic supremacy. For instance, with American oil conglomerations controlling the spigot in Iraq the U.S. will insure that it profits from the rapid economic expansion expected from China's in the coming decades.

The cost of maintaining and extending America's hegemony has been high, and perhaps no people have paid a higher price than the Iraqis. As Everest details the United States aided and abetted the rise of Saddam Hussein and his oppressive Ba'ath party because Washington saw it as an effective counterweight to Islamic fundamentalism and potential Soviet expansionism. Following the British example, however, the United States saw its interests best served by keeping all the states in the region relatively weak and divided, and to that end the Reagan/Bush administration cynically armed both sides in the unusually bloody Iran/Iraq war, including providing Saddam with chemical and biological weapons. Two

subsequent Bush administrations, Everest contends, would shed crocodile tears while citing Saddam's use of WMD against Iran and the Iraqi people as a pretext for two invasions that may have resulted in the deaths of as many as two million Iraqis when one factors in the costs of sanctions and collateral damage from U.S. targeting of Iraq's critical infrastructure.

In the midst of the second Gulf War it is clear that most Iraqis view U.S. troops as occupiers, not liberators. Everest's analysis helps explain why the Iraqis have good reason to doubt U.S. intention, and why most Americans might be wise to doubt the Bush administration's intentions as well. For if Everest is right the U.S. invasion has little to do with alleviating the global rift between the Arab world and the West – the rift between the have and have nots that feeds terrorism – but of perpetuating it.

About the Author — Scott D. O'Reilly is an independent writer with degrees in philosophy and psychology. His work has been published in *The Humanist*, *Philosophy Now*, *Intervention Magazine*, *Think*, *The New Standard*, and *The Philosopher's Magazine*. He is a contributor to the book *The Great Thinkers A-Z* (Continuum, 2004) and writes the monthly "Voice From America" column for *Compass Magazine*. He is working on a book called *Socrates in Cyberspace* that examines traditional conceptions of the soul in light of the latest neuroscientific findings.

Contact neuroscott@aol.com

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