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Is Big Oil Lubricating War Drive?

By JEREMY RIFKIN

Does the Bush administration have a hidden agenda? If you want to know how utterly estranged Europe and the United States have become, listen to the talk in the streets over the possible U.S. invasion of Iraq.

In the U.S., most Americans believe President Bush when he says we have a moral obligation to protect the world from Saddam Hussein's pathological desire to build and employ weapons of mass destruction. In Europe, by contrast, most people believe that the U.S. is planning to invade Iraq to secure its oil fields.

So, while most Americans think that we are planning an attack on Iraq to save the world from a madman, most Europeans think that Bush is the madman, with the evil intention of grabbing a foothold in the oil-rich Middle East to extend the "American empire." And the media on both sides of the pond are pandering to the political sensibilities of their respective regions.

Still reeling from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, most Americans believe Bush when he says Iraq poses a potential danger to their security. Many buy the White House notion of preventive action against political terrorism. And they are incredulous that our supposed allies are not taking the global terrorist threat more seriously.

Still, one can't help but be surprised by the almost total silence on the question of the "oil connection." Is it possible that U.S. political leaders and reporters, columnists, editors and producers are so naive that they really believe there is no other

White House agenda in the Middle East except the one that the administration is extolling? Do they really believe that oil plays no role in the strategic thinking of the inner circles at the White House?

This national silence is even more deafening when we look at the key players in this unfolding drama. Both Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney come out of the oil industry. Their careers have been shaped by oil interests. Their political fortunes have been boosted by the oil lobby.

Bush was the No. 1 recipient of energy industry money, collecting more than \$1.8 million in contributions, more than any other candidate for federal office received over the last decade.

If there was any reason to be suspicious of the White House's intentions in regard to Iraq, certainly the fact that Cheney held closed-door meetings with the leaders of the energy industry immediately upon taking office — and then refused to release the record of those discussions or the names and corporate affiliations of the participants — should at least raise a few eyebrows in the media. That's not to suggest that these private discussions related to American security interests in Iraq and the Middle East. Rather, what it says is that the interests of the oil companies are never far from the thoughts of Bush and Cheney.

Thus it is incredible that no one in Congress or the media has bothered to ask: Does the desire to secure the second-largest oil fields in the world play any strategic role in White House thinking? Of course, it is understandable that neither American politicians nor the media want to appear unpatriotic. Still, there is enough circumstantial evidence

to at least take seriously what the Europeans and most of the rest of the world believe is the real U.S. intention in the Middle East.

Certainly this "second motive" could dramatically change the public debate. For Americans who already have doubts about the extent of the Iraqi threat and the need to commit troops, the prospect that we might be doing this, even in part, to secure the oil interests of giant companies would not be welcome.

Of one thing I am sure: The American people would never support any invasion to grab oil fields. After all, we fought the last Persian Gulf War to stop Iraq from capturing the oil fields of Kuwait.

It might be that Europe and the rest of the world are simply wrong. But to have virtually no public discussion in the U.S. of what the rest of the world suspects is the White House's real reason for wanting to depose Hussein makes me feel that there is indeed more to Bush's Iraq obsession than we are being told.

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