

# Britain: Reports admit this is a war for oil

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Britain's media has hardly distinguished itself during the US bombing of Afghanistan, other than for its willingness to parrot the official line emanating from Washington and London. But it has proved increasingly difficult for the press barons to maintain a united journalistic front.

A combination of factors—the growing concern within Europe over the direction of the US campaign, or lack of it; a fear that the US will be the sole beneficiary of the war; and even a reaction against the mounting absurdities that constitute the official *raison d'être* for targeting Afghanistan—have given rise to a number of reports that depart from the formulaic invocation that the ongoing military campaign is “a war against terrorism”.

The most significant of these reports was an item on the October 25 edition of *Channel Four* television's flagship seven o'clock news programme. Reporter Liam Halligan was introduced by the programme's anchorman posing the question, “But is there another, less well advertised motive for the bombing of Afghanistan?” Halligan answered in the affirmative, adding, “The Gulf War was largely about oil. You won't hear it said often but, inadvertently, this one is too.”

Halligan called oil “an important subtext to the struggle over Afghanistan”.

He noted that the US, which consumes 22 million barrels a day, is by far the world's biggest oil importer. He remarked upon the present reliance on the Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, which produces seven million barrels a day, but also drew attention to the production of four and a half million barrels a day in the former Soviet Union.

Halligan continued, “Apart from Russia, it's these newly independent Central Asian states that are key. Already 20 billion barrels of oil reserves have been found in Khazakhstan—and there could be much more.

The oil and gas so far discovered in these parts is worth \$3 trillion in today's prices.”

Getting this oil to Western markets was, Halligan stated, “the culmination of the Great Game. The struggle for influence in Central Asia is the last great oil rush, as the West tries to reduce dependence on the Gulf.”

*Channel Four* went on to explain the importance of Afghanistan in this regard. Russia had built its own pipeline from Kazakhstan to the Black Sea. In order to compete, Western oil corporations could build pipelines along a number of routes. But by far the most economical would be from Central Asia through Afghanistan, to Pakistan.

That, said Halligan, was “a major reason the US unofficially backed the Taliban in the mid-90s, when American oil men were planning such a pipeline. But when the Taliban turned it's back on Uncle Sam, Western oil money got scared.”

As well as *Channel Four*'s coverage, two articles have appeared in the *Guardian* newspaper that deserve to be noted. The *Guardian*, which is considered home to Britain's liberal intelligentsia, is generally supportive of the war, but critical of certain aspects of its conduct. This was reflected in an op-ed piece by the radical environmentalist George Monbiot entitled “America's pipe dream”, which sets out to explain how “A pro-Western regime in Kabul should give the US an Afghan route for Caspian oil”.

Monbiot takes pains to reassure *Guardian* readers that he is on-message as far as the Labour government's rationale for supporting the war is concerned. He concludes his article with the bizarre couplet, “I believe that the US government is genuine in its attempt to stamp out terrorism by military force in Afghanistan, however misguided that may be. But we would be naïve to believe that this is all it is doing.”

The first statement is an expression of Monbiot's

political cowardice, for his entire article contradicts the Bush administration's claim to be motivated by a desire to "stamp out terrorism". Again facing both ways at once, Monbiot insists, "The invasion of Afghanistan is certainly a campaign against terrorism, but it may also be a late colonial adventure." He explains, "Afghanistan has some oil and gas of its own, but not enough to qualify as a major strategic concern. Its northern neighbours, by contrast, contain reserves, which could be critical to future global supply. In 1998, Dick Cheney, now US vice-president but then chief executive of a major oil services company, remarked: 'I cannot think of a time when we have had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian.' But the oil and gas there is worthless until it is moved. The only route which makes both political and economic sense is through Afghanistan."

The West's options for moving oil are limited by its desire to prevent a strengthening of either Russia or Iran. It has an added benefit, in that "pipelines through Afghanistan would allow the US both to pursue its aim of 'diversifying energy supply' and to penetrate the world's most lucrative markets" in south Asia.

Monbiot's article acknowledges a debt to the work of Ahmed Rashid, the author of the recently published *Taliban—Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, and a correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and the *Daily Telegraph*. Rashid documents how in 1995, the US oil company Unocal started negotiating to build oil and gas pipelines from Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan to Pakistan and on to the Arabian sea. This required "a single administration in Afghanistan, which would guarantee safe passage for its goods." Monbiot notes, "Soon after the Taliban took Kabul in September 1996, the *Telegraph* reported that 'oil industry insiders say the dream of securing a pipeline across Afghanistan is the main reason why Pakistan, a close political ally of America's, has been so supportive of the Taliban, and why America has quietly acquiesced in its conquest of Afghanistan.'"

Relations with the Taliban were only broken off two years later, after the US embassy bombings in east Africa. But US designs on Afghanistan continued. Monbiot cites a statement by the US energy information administration immediately prior to the

September 11 outrages: "Afghanistan's significance from an energy standpoint stems from its geographical position as a potential transit route for oil and natural gas exports from central Asia to the Arabian sea. This potential includes the possible construction of oil and natural gas export pipelines through Afghanistan". He concludes his examination with the related observation, "If the US succeeds in overthrowing the Taliban and replacing them with a stable and grateful pro-Western government and if the US then binds the economies of central Asia to that of its ally Pakistan, it will have crushed not only terrorism, but also the growing ambitions of both Russia and China. Afghanistan, as ever, is the key to the western domination of Asia."

The next day, Andy Rowell wrote in the *Guardian* on the same theme in his article "Route to riches". He begins, "As the war in Afghanistan unfolds, there is frantic diplomatic activity to ensure that any post-Taliban government will be both democratic and pro-West. Hidden in this explosive geo-political equation is the sensitive issue of securing control and export of the region's vast oil and gas reserves."

Rowell draws attention to an article in *Military Review*, the journal of the US army, which states, "As oil companies build oil pipelines from the Caucasus and central Asia to supply Japan and the West, these strategic concerns gain military implications." He cites Unocal's insistence that "construction of the pipeline cannot begin until a recognized government is in place in Kabul that has the confidence of governments, lenders, and our company."

All three reports are based on information that is both freely available and common knowledge within the media and the political establishment. Indeed Rowell described Rashid's work on the Taliban and the US as "the book Tony Blair has been reportedly reading since the conflict started." Far from saving the mass media from opprobrium, therefore, these reports stand as an indictment of a more general readiness to regurgitate whatever lies and propaganda they are asked to by the powers that be.



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