

Oil and “conspiracy theories”: a reply to a liberal apologist for the US war in Afghanistan

Patrick Martin
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Below is the first part of a two-part article replying to a recent commentary attacking so-called “conspiracy theories” about the US response to the September 11 terror attacks, including an article posted last November on the World Socialist Web Site. The second part was posted on Saturday, September 21.

An article published in the July issue of *American Prospect*, the monthly liberal magazine edited by Robert Kuttner, denies that the war in Afghanistan is an integral part of the struggle by the United States to dominate the oil and gas resources of the Caspian and Central Asia. Any suggestion that the US war is driven by such concerns amounts to an illegitimate and paranoid “conspiracy theory,” claims the writer, Ken Silverstein. [“No War for Oil!” <http://www.prospect.org/print/V13/14/silverstein-k.html>]

As a “classic example” of such a conspiracy theory, Silverstein singles out an article posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* last year, under the headline, “US planned war in Afghanistan long before September 11.” He quotes only a single paragraph from the WSWWS article, identifying only the author—this writer—but not the publication. The passage reads: “The American media has conducted a systematic cover-up of the real economic and strategic interests that underlie the war against Afghanistan, in order to sustain the pretense that the war emerged overnight, full-blown, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11.”

This paragraph is a peculiar choice for denunciation, since what it asserts is almost self-evident, and not at all conspiratorial. The American media has, as any objective observer would be compelled to admit, obediently parroted the Bush administration’s claims that the sole motive for the US invasion of Afghanistan was to punish those responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, thus covering up the other, more fundamental reasons for the war. Silverstein is well aware of the corrupt and prostituted role of the American media. In fact, he is contributing editor of a publication, *Counterpunch*, which boasts in its masthead: “Twice a month we bring our readers the stories that the corporate press never prints.”

Nonetheless, Silverstein cites the WSWWS claim as the height of paranoia, adding, “These sorts of conspiracy theories, especially the ones concerning oil supplies, aren’t just circulating in fringe circles, they’ve found their way into mainstream outlets, too.” He then cites reports in the British, French and American press, including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*, both pillars of the bourgeois establishment, which concede that the interests of the oil industry are a powerful factor underlying the Afghan war.

According to Silverstein, who prefers piling up adjectives to genuine critical analysis, those who claim that oil plays a major role in the US intervention in Afghanistan are guilty of being “paranoid,” “ludicrous,” “utterly ridiculous,” “dubious,” “particularly stupid,” “not remotely

realistic,” “dumb” and “delusional.” What he is denouncing so stridently, under the pejorative label of conspiracy theory, is any investigation into the concrete material interests involved in US foreign policy. He forbids any consideration of how the war serves to further the predatory interests of corporate America, through the seizure of territory and valuable natural resources. Precisely what is essential to the analysis of American imperialism he declares illegitimate.

Silverstein claims that those who point to the role of oil in the Afghan war “display little understanding of the Caspian or of energy markets.” He seeks to substantiate this blanket assertion by citing alleged factual errors made by the “conspiracy theorists”: they grossly overestimate the amount of oil within Afghanistan, or the country’s potential as a pipeline route from oil and gas fields deeper in Central Asia; they don’t understand the location of other pipeline projects, or the potential market destination for oil and gas shipments.

None of these errors are quoted from the specific writers who allegedly made them. Silverstein simply attributes them in general to all those who have sought to analyze the role of the energy industry in the Afghan war. He concocts a series of straw men and ridicules and abuses them as a substitute for actually addressing the question of the relation of the Afghanistan war to the oil resources of Central Asia.

This cynical method is typified by Silverstein’s headline, “Is the United States really after Afghanistan’s resources? Not a chance.” That Afghanistan itself possesses little in the way of oil resources is well established, although it does possess significant supplies of natural gas, estimated at 5 trillion cubic feet, and accounting for as much as half its pre-Taliban exports. According to the most recent US State Department assessment, moreover: “Afghanistan is endowed with a wealth of natural resources, including extensive deposits of natural gas, petroleum, coal, copper, chromite, talc, barites, sulfur, lead, zinc, iron ore, salt, and precious and semiprecious stones.” [Bureau of South Asian Affairs, June 2002, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5380.htm>]

Silverstein’s focus on the presence or absence of large petroleum deposits within the boundaries of Afghanistan is narrow and mechanical to the point of absurdity. By that logic one could argue that the Reagan administration’s war of subversion against the Nicaraguan Sandinistas had nothing to do with maintaining US domination over the Panama Canal because the canal runs through a different Central American country. The real question in relation to Afghanistan is whether the drive of American imperialism to control the oil and gas resources of the whole Central Asian region is a major factor in the war. The answer to that is an unqualified yes.

The antidote to Silverstein’s method is historical perspective. The war in Afghanistan cannot be understood on the basis of a timescale that begins with September 11, 2001 as the origin of the universe. For more

than a decade, since the dissolution of the USSR, the United States has been seeking to build up its political, economic and military influence in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus, at least four of which—Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan—possess huge reserves of oil or natural gas.

Given that all the states of Central Asia are landlocked or border on the Caspian Sea, which has no outlet to the oceans, a major issue in the exploitation of the region's resources is how to get them to the world market. The construction and siting of pipelines have become the focus of a vicious struggle among the major powers and the big oil companies. Russia favors a northern route, funneling the oil and gas of Central Asia through its own pipeline system. China is seeking an eastern route, through Kazakhstan and Chinese-controlled Xinjiang. Iran offers the shortest and most direct route, south to the Persian Gulf.

The United States has pushed both a western route, through Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean, as well as a more circuitous southern route across Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. For strategic reasons Washington opposes both the Iranian route and the northern route through Russia.

Silverstein treats this issue as though it were purely a matter of convenience or technical feasibility, rather than a struggle of rival powers for control of lucrative resources. Thus he argues that the upturn in the Russian economy in the late 1990s, which made possible greater shipments of Turkmenistan gas and Kazakhstan oil through the Russian pipeline system, has reduced the need for a southern outlet through Afghanistan.

This ignores the salient fact of US strategic concerns, which are intensified, not lessened, by the prospect of greater dependence on Russia by the former Soviet republics. As a Clinton administration official, Sheila Heslin of the National Security Council, told a Senate investigating committee in 2000, the goal of American policy in the Caspian is “in essence to break Russia's monopoly of control over the transportation of oil from the region” (Michael T. Klare, *Resource Wars*, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 2001, p. 89).

While pouring contempt on the notion that a pipeline across Afghanistan makes economic, political or technical sense, Silverstein distorts the views of some of those he cites in evidence. For instance, he quotes a paper prepared by journalist Ahmed Rashid for the Petroleum Finance Company in October 1997, casting doubt on the viability of a trans-Afghan pipeline project. But he does not cite the later analysis by Rashid in his best-selling 2001 book, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia*.

There Rashid elaborates on the importance of the trans-Afghan pipeline in understanding the Clinton administration's sympathetic stance toward the Taliban during the Islamic fundamentalist movement's initial rise to power, possibly including covert funding through the CIA. At one point Rashid writes of the alliance between Pakistan and Unocal, the big US oil company which was leading the charge for an Afghan pipeline:

“After the dismissal of the Bhutto government in 1996, the newly elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, his Oil Minister Chaudry Nisar Ali Khan, the army and the ISI [Inter-Service Intelligence, Pakistan's spy agency] fully backed Unocal. Pakistan wanted more direct US support for the Taliban and urged Unocal to start construction quickly in order to legitimize the Taliban. Basically the USA and Unocal accepted the ISI's analysis and aim—that a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would make Unocal's job much easier and quicken US recognition” (Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil & Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000, p. 168).

Rashid notes the prominent role of certain former US officials in Unocal's efforts to launch the pipeline project. Henry Kissinger, the former US secretary of state, attended the 1995 meeting at which the first attempt at a trans-Afghan pipeline was announced. One paid company

adviser was Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan émigré who was later selected by Bush for the National Security Council, specializing in Central Asian affairs. The ex-Unocal man is now special US envoy to his native country—in effect, the US proconsul in Kabul, who supervises the political affairs of the Afghan puppet regime from day to day. Hamid Karzai, the interim president of Afghanistan, was also a paid consultant for the US oil industry, a fact that Silverstein well knows, but chooses not to note.

Under the Karzai-Khalilzad-Unocal regime in Afghanistan, the pipeline plans have been taken off the shelf. On March 7, Karzai flew to Ashkabat, capital of Turkmenistan, for talks with president-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov. On May 30, Karzai, Niyazov and Pakistan President Musharraf met in Islamabad to sign a memorandum of understanding on a gas pipeline project, beginning with a feasibility study. The pipeline would run 1,460 kilometers from Turkmenistan's Dauletabad gas field to Gwadar, a port in Pakistan on the Arabian Sea, where natural gas would be liquified for export.

The Asian Development Bank has begun studying routes for shorter gas lines that will bring Turkmen gas to Kabul and several Afghan mining sites. Afghan officials have invited Unocal to resume its lead role in the project. According to one report, “Since the US government launched military action in Afghanistan last autumn, observers have been speculating that Washington will seek to revive the pipeline plan. Indeed, US officials have expressed enthusiasm for the project, saying it could serve as a stabilizing factor in war-weary Afghanistan” [*Alexander's Gas & Oil Report*, June 27, 2002, <http://www.gasandoil.com/goc/news/nts22628.htm>].

Whatever the future significance of Afghanistan for the energy industry, there can be no doubt that the energy industry is of overwhelming significance to Afghanistan. The \$2.2 billion price tag for a trans-Afghan pipeline is far larger than the total amount of foreign aid pledged to the Karzai government and more than 10 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product.

On a more fundamental level, the claim that oil played no role in the US invasion of Afghanistan is simply unserious. Aside from the testimony of inside players in the oil and gas pipeline talks, there is the not unimportant fact that the war in Afghanistan has been accompanied by the stationing of American military forces throughout oil-rich Central Asia, and followed by the preparations for American aggression against Iraq, possessor of the world's second-largest oil reserves.

Moreover, the war in Afghanistan has coincided with a steady intensification of US pressure on Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter, and heavy-handed hints that a section of the Bush administration regards the Saudis as a future target after Iraq. The last six months have also seen a US-backed attempted coup in Venezuela and stepped-up military intervention in Colombia, the two most important South American suppliers of oil to the US market. None of these episodes can be properly understood without considering them within the framework of the overall American policy of seeking to dominate the market in the world's most important and strategic resource, oil.

A remarkable article appeared September 15 on the front page of the *Washington Post*, under the headline, “In Iraqi War Scenario, Oil Is Key Issue: U.S. Drillers Eye Huge Petroleum Pool.” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A18841-2002Sep14.html> The article begins: “A U.S.-led ouster of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could open a bonanza for American oil companies long banished from Iraq, scuttling oil deals between Baghdad and Russia, France and other countries, and reshuffling world petroleum markets, according to industry officials and leaders of the Iraqi opposition.”

The article noted that Iraq's huge proven reserves of 112 billion barrels of oil “has made it potentially one of the administration's biggest bargaining chips in negotiations” for support for its planned war of

aggression. In other words, the US government is bribing accomplices for the attack on Iraq with promises of a share in the plunder. French, Italian and Russian companies, which presently enjoy a favored position in the Iraq oil market, could find themselves cut out by their American and British rivals in the event that a US-backed stooge regime is established in Baghdad.

Even Silverstein would be hard-pressed to argue that oil is not the major factor in the US war drive against Iraq. But these rapidly moving events have overtaken his arguments about Afghanistan, since the US invasion and overthrow of the Taliban regime was clearly only a stepping stone towards the main action: the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the seizure Iraq's oil resources.

To be continued



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