When asked at the Liberal Club "what’s this war about," John Reed, in Hollywood’s version, answered simply – ”profits.” That was World War I. Today WW IV is upon us and some would say the answer hasn’t changed. That may be true enough, but the consequences are far more serious and likely to affect humanity more than the mustard gas of WW I or the economic depression that followed. The politically powerful who seek to continue reaping what they regard as their due may see short term success, but by shoring up their position on the deck, they may ultimately bring the whole ship down, for the underlying conditions have changed dramatically. Indeed, for them this war is about profits, but for us it is actually about the environment.

The US refusal to sign the Kyoto accords was not the consequence of a moronic president acting out of ignorance. The invasion of Iraq and the threats against Syria and Iran are likewise not simply the insane ravings of a powerful class coveting petroleum to enhance their already bloated pocketbooks. Rather, these are carefully calculated actions designed to stave off what is seen as the most dire threat to the powerful - a transformation of the world’s energy system from fossil fuels to renewable sources.

The current world political/economic system is based on fossil fuels as the fundamental source of energy, with petroleum alone counting for about 40% of what is effectively control the world, and it is no secret who presently controls its supply. Over the past 40 years we have seen tremendous growth in the technology of wind and solar power. The world is now nearing a tipping point. These energy technologies based on renewables are fast becoming economically competitive with petroleum. For some of us this is tremendously good news. The very real problems of global warming become more severe
and seemingly insurmountable with each passing year and the move towards non-carbon based energy systems is what any sensible person knows must eventually happen. That the economics are gradually coming to favor renewables is certainly great news for the world and for the humans that occupy it. But not necessarily for the narrow goals of the current crop of power wielders.

The main problem is that everyone expects the "global south," the underdeveloped countries of the world, to develop, probably led by China. As they develop their energy demands are expected to skyrocket, as has happened in the past with all economic development. According to US government estimates, by 2007 China will use 502030 as much as the US (which is, of course, by far the biggest consumer in the world today). Those who maintain controls over the supply of the source of that energy will maintain control over the world, which is the stated goal of many of the super rich in the developed world, as so articulately expressed by many theoreticians of the Right such as Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld, Cheney, Pearl and their colleagues.

The problem for them is that renewables, especially solar and wind, are coming dangerously close to being cost-competitive with petroleum. If the European Union and Japan were to significantly move in the direction of these renewables, the world panorama could change dramatically. Demand for development projects that rely on solar and wind would likely increase. This would shift the entire energy system in that direction and thus reduce the central role of petroleum in contemporary games of power. So, if the expected development of the global south happens after the overall discourse of energy has shifted away from the carbon-based economy, the expected dramatic increase in world demand for petroleum will not be manifest.

Thus the immediate problem, for those whose power depends on maintaining fossil carbon as the main source of the world’s energy, is the price of petroleum. As mentioned above, we are currently near a turning point regarding prices. If petroleum prices rise, or even if they become too erratic, the balance could shift to renewables. The boondoggle expected from the development of the global south would vanish, as would the present leverage maintained over the major US rivals in the developed world, and the ultimate political power that flows from the barrel of the pipeline would be lost.

The immediate problem is nothing so ethereal as "democracy" nor so flashy as weapons of mass destruction. It is the global price of oil. In the industry there are four countries that are commonly referred to as "petroleum-price swing states." These are Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates,
and Iraq, which, together with Iran, have about 67% of the world’s reserves. Others, such as Venezuela and Mexico are undoubtedly important, but only those four can actually take action to stabilize the price of petroleum on the world market, producing more when the price goes too high and producing less when the price goes too low. Whoever controls what those four states do with their petroleum, controls the world price. Having hegemonic control over Iraq, with a "Muslim" or "Arab" military able to project power but friendly to the US, will allow maintenance of effective control over pumping rates of the petroleum-price swing states. It is imperative for those who currently wield global power to maintain petroleum prices low enough so that the European Union and Japan do not make the transformation to renewables. And every day that China keeps expanding its economy, this necessity of controlling petroleum prices becomes more important.

So, in the end, the war in Iraq, the refusal to sign the Kyoto accords, and the likely arrival of a war with Syria and even Iran are all ultimately about the environment. Will we maintain that carbon-based system that all scientists now agree is suicidal in the end, or will we allow for the transformation to a system based on renewables? Those who oppose the war in the Middle East do so out of basic principles with which most civilized people in the world agree. But those who continue pushing for war do not do so out of the lofty goals invented for the lapdog media in the US, but rather out of an honest and accurate assessment of the real danger facing them today - unacceptably high petroleum prices and the consequent shift of world economies toward renewable sources of energy.

So that’s what this war is about, Mr. Reed. Yes, its profits. But securing those profits for the long term stems from power, both physical and political.

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